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THE OLD VICARAGE.

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. HUBBACK,

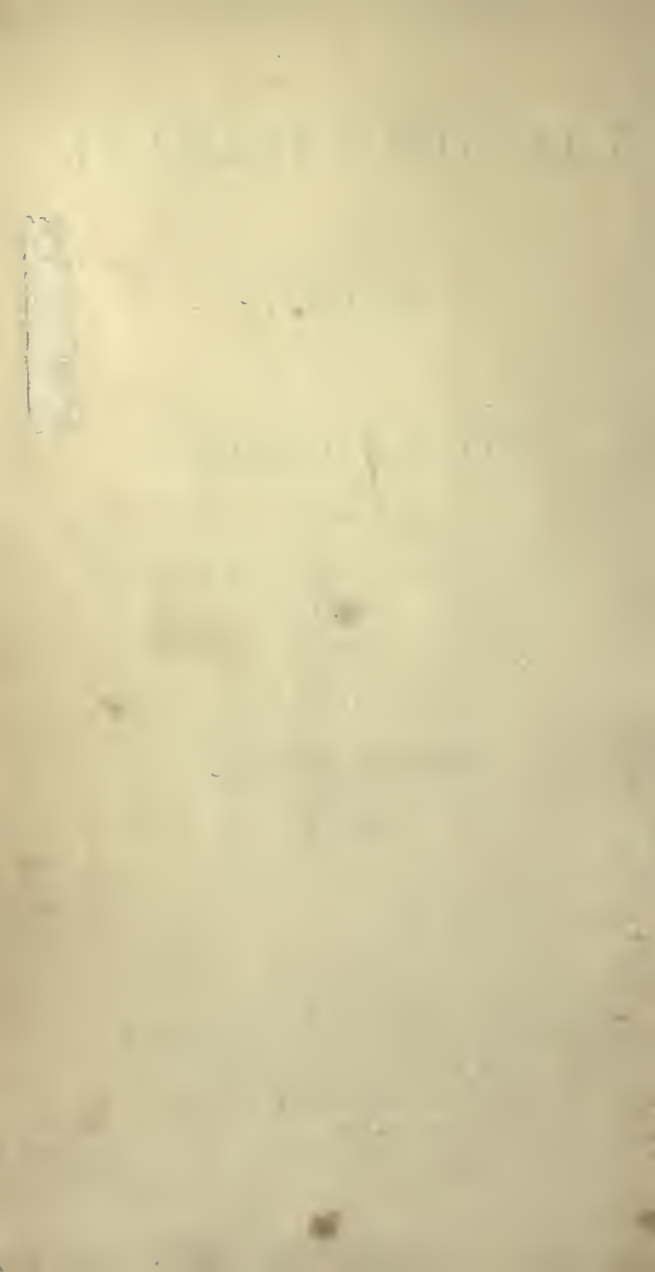
AUTHORESS OF

“THE WIFE’S SISTER,” “MAY AND DECEMBER,”
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :
CHARLES J. SKEET, PUBLISHER,
10, KING WILLIAM STREET,
CHARING CROSS.
1856.



THE OLD VICARAGE.

CHAPTER I.

“ Children’s voices should be dear
(Call once more) to a mother’s ear ;
Children’s voices wild with pain,
Surely she will come again ;
Call her once, and come away !”

THE FORSAKEN MERMAN.

IT was a summer’s evening. The yellow sunshine streamed through the boles of the forest trees, tinting them with purple, vermilion, gold, or the richest brown. It gave a metallic lustre to the tops of the giant oaks, and lighted up with a silvery gleam the long feathery sprays

of the graceful beech trees, waving gently and slowly as the soft breeze passed rustling amongst them. The same slanting sunbeams fell on the dark glossy foliage of the tall groups of holly, and twinkled like stars upon their stiff-pointed leaves.

Beneath these ancient and hoary trees, on a natural terrace clothed with soft mossy turf, and commanding, along a glade in the forest, a full view of the glowing west, there walked, with slow and lingering step, two persons, who seemed too deeply engrossed in conversation to heed the loveliness of the evening. One of these was a woman, who might perhaps be half way between thirty and forty, but still possessing a large share of personal beauty; tall, dark, glowing, with bright black eyes, and hair as black as jet, parted off her forehead in rich braids, and as she carried her bonnet in her hand, they caught the gleaming sunshine, and seemed to turn purple in its splendour. Her companion was a young girl, slender, fair, and rather pale, except

that as she listened to the earnest discourse of the matron, the flitting colour dyed her cheek for a moment, and then left it pale again. Her slim figure, and girlish proportions, gave a notion of extreme youth and delicacy, and yet her face was of that kind which brings a feeling of trust and repose as you gaze upon it; an idea that, young as she was, there was steadiness and principle to be read there.

“But, dear mamma,” said the girl, “why do you talk in this way? You will soon be about again, and able to see to all these things yourself.”

And she gazed with earnest, anxious fondness at the face of her companion, unable to realise that danger could lurk near, or death invade a countenance so healthy and so invariably cheerful.

“His will be done,” said Mrs. Duncan, raising her eyes, and fixing them on the glowing west. “Life and death are in His hands; but, Hilary, it will neither increase my danger,

nor my anxiety, if I give you such directions as may be your help and guide hereafter. It is a great charge, a heavy responsibility which will fall on you, should I be taken from you, but one which will not be laid on you, unless He sees good ; and received from Him in a humble, trusting, loving spirit, the event will be blessed. In my weakness, and want of faith, I shrink from the idea, sometimes ; but I know that all is, all will be right, if you can but believe, and feel it so. Nothing He lays on us is too heavy to bear, if we do not add to it the burden of our own selfish repinings, mistrust, and impatience."

" Oh ! mamma, it cannot be best to be without you ; such a trial cannot be in store for us ; for my father too—how could he bear it ? and surely he so good, so heavenly-minded, so tender as he is—oh ! he cannot need affliction ; do not talk so, mamma, do not fancy such things ; you will do yourself harm by dwelling on it."

Mrs. Duncan's eyes filled, and her lip quivered for a minute ; she was silent a little space, and then she spoke again, calmly, firmly, gravely.

“ Hilary, ever since I have filled your mother's place, I have met with the duty and affection of a daughter from you. I came to you when you were too young to understand my claims, but I have never had to complain, so far as our relationship is concerned. Be ever the same ! do not now, by giving way to your feelings, make it more difficult for me to control my own. Try to listen to what may be my last wishes.”

Hilary clasped her step-mother's hand, struggled with her rising tears, swallowed down a sob or two, and then turning quietly round, said,—“ Go on, dear mother ! I will attend, and endeavour to remember.”

“ Young as you are, Hilary, I do not fear to trust you, for I know that you have that within you which will lead you right. Experience, indeed, you cannot have, and you may mistake sometimes ; but with your earnest love of truth,

your simplicity, candour, gentleness, and humility, you cannot go very far wrong; and I would rather confide my girls to you, than to many an elder head. I know that you will lean on the true, unfailing Support—that you will not trust your own understanding.”

“ Dear mother, if I have any good principle or right habit, I owe it to you and papa; what should I have been, had you not led me so kindly and gently in childhood?” said Hilary, blushing at the praise which she could not believe she deserved.

“ But my girls are not like you, Hilary,” continued the mother, “ and their characters have cost me many an anxious hour. Heaven knows how earnestly I have prayed sometimes, to be spared as their guide; but this is self-will, and self-conceit, perhaps; now my only prayer is, that, in whose hands soever they may fall, whatever troubles may come upon them, they may be brought home safe at last. We are so unbelieving, we would fain choose our own path, and

the paths of our dear ones also ; as if our narrow view could be better trusted than His, who has told us so plainly what we ought to seek, and what we may then hope for. All will be right at last, and now I trust them entirely to the Will which cannot err : yet not the less would I warn you, Hilary, of the care and discipline they need. Sybil is tender, loving, feeble, clinging for support to those around her ; do not act for her, my love ; make her feel her own responsibility, or the realities and cares of life will fall with a crushing force on her. Look at the clematis which garlands this lime—such is she ; take away her support, and the long wreaths will droop and sink to the earth, and may be trampled by every careless foot.”

“ But we cannot change the nature of the clematis, mamma ; we can only prop it up, and guard it carefully, and rejoice even in its clinging, graceful fragility, which gives a beauty to the bare and rugged stem, or the unpoetical wall and trellis.”

“ True, you cannot change the clematis, Hilary ; but therein a Christian differs from a soulless plant ; her nature may be strengthened by attention and discipline, till she may be firm and yet flexible ; yielding and yet self-supporting ; regaining with elastic vigour the upward tendency, even after the hand has bent it down, or the breeze turned it aside. You cannot make a clematis into a willow, but you may teach a feeble mind and drooping heart where to find strength of purpose and constancy of aim. Teach Sybil that the weakest may have strength sufficient to their need, but not in earthly things : earthly props break and crumble away, or are removed in kindness, lest we lean too much upon them. Trust to the One above. He never fails. Poor Sybil !—she is very far from knowing this as yet !”

They were both silent for some time ; then Mrs. Duncan seated herself, and continued, as Hilary nestled close to her side.

“ As to Gwyneth, she is different : she has all

the passionate and hasty nature of my country : Welsh blood runs in her veins, and along with this warmth, she has much self-will and presumption ; she doubts not her own opinion, and cannot bear to have it questioned ; yet she is so young, that I have every reason to hope that attention may check what is wrong, and religion lead her to true strength and confidence. And then for my little Nest—the darling !—who can tell what that little black-eyed, bewitching fairy may turn out ?—Heaven help me ! but it is hard to think of leaving her.”

Mrs. Duncan shuddered, and closed her eyes, as if struggling with some deep emotion.

“ Why should you ? ” said Hilary, anxiously. “ Dearest mother, do you feel ill now ? It is so long since you have had one of your bad attacks of pain ; not for months now ; I am sure you need not be alarmed.”

Mrs. Duncan smiled, a faint smile it was, as if she would rather put aside a subject of discussion than enter on it. Then, after a pause,

she added, " I believe you will find all my papers and accounts quite clear, and for the rest, dear Hilary, you are well able to take my place in the parish now ; and whatever may occur, you must do it for a month at least. But there are horses' feet upon the turf ; your father and sisters are coming home. Say nothing at present of what I have told you, and let us go to meet them !"

They rose, and advanced towards the house ; crossing a part of the garden, of which the terrace where they had been walking formed the eastern boundary. Dividing the lawn from an open green space which lay in front of the old rectory, was a line of wooden palings nearly covered by ivy, honeysuckle, roses, and many flowering shrubs, and over this they saw, approaching through a shadowy glade, three forest ponies ; the tallest bore Mr. Duncan, an elderly man, whose figure was, however, active and upright, and his countenance marked with the glow of health and the look of peace : the other two riders were girls, the Sybil and Gwyneth already

mentioned, whose black eyes, and long waving locks flowing from beneath their broad-brimmed straw hats, immediately reminded you of their mother. The children, for they were only girls of twelve and thirteen, sprung from their little ponies, and rushed up to the garden gate, just as Mrs. Duncan and Hilary reached it; and before their father had descended in his more leisurely way, and consigned the animals to the old grey-headed servant who came forward to receive them, they had advanced far in the history of their ride, its adventures, delights, and novelties. They had found a new path, had come to a beautiful stream; Gwyneth had leapt her horse across before papa came up; Sybil was afraid, and had hung back, even when encouraged by him; then they had seen such a lovely dell, all surrounded with trees—oh! such a place for a gipsy party; mamma must come there some day, and they would have tea out there, under the huge oaks and beech, beside that broken mossy bank, out of which such a bright tiny stream trickled

from under a grey stone. Up came papa, and listened to the eager speaker, as Gwyneth, with her cheeks glowing and her bright eyes glittering, dwelt with rather too much complacency, perhaps, upon the courage she had shown, until her father reminded her, with laughing but affectionate manner, how Gwyneth herself had shrunk and trembled when, as they were leading their ponies down a steep and precipitous path, a large toad had crossed their road, and hopped towards her; whilst Sybil's only care had been that the creature should not be hurt by foot or hoof;—and after that, Gwyneth held her tongue for a while.

They sat in the large wide porch, which, with its projecting gable and curiously carved roof, formed so conspicuous an ornament to the front of the Vicarage, and harmonised so well with the many angles, overhanging eaves, mullioned windows, and twisted chimneys of that quaint old house. It was a building well suited to the forest scenery on which it closely bordered, with

its time-mellowed red brick, and grey stone coignings, and huge oaken beams, whose ends were grotesquely carved. From that porch you could see the old church, half concealed in a grove of trees, principally lime and sycamore; and farther off, the houses scattered on the village green, or retreating back amidst the clumps of oak and holly; whilst to the south, through a long vista in the forest, you caught a view of distant hills, blue and shadowy, and a winding river, and a wide extended plain.

Here they sat and chatted gaily, whilst the young girls ate the fruit and cake, for which their ride had given them an appetite, and which Hilary brought out to them in an old-fashioned china basket, until the hour of bed-time arrived, and the children left them; and then the others returned to the cool parlour, where Hilary made tea, and smiled and chatted with her father; Mrs. Duncan meanwhile resting quietly on the sofa, nearly silent, and perhaps engrossed in thought.

Hilary's was the hopeful as well as the trust-

ful temper of youth, unaccustomed to the vicissitudes of life ; the storm of which she saw no symptoms could not alarm her ; and although her step-mother's presentiments had at first raised a vague terror, she had recovered from this feeling, and was now tranquil.

The trust which she felt that all would be for the best, conspired to increase this peaceful state, for to her young mind, it seemed impossible that good could spring from such sorrow as the loss of the only mother she had known, would occasion her and her family ; therefore this loss was not to be expected or feared. Hers was the youthful idea of divine protection, and fatherly care ; years of experience alone can teach us that " His ways are not as ours," and that it is not exemption from suffering which is promised to His children, but such discipline as shall strengthen, and purify, and elevate their hearts.

It was a cheerful family party on which the bright summer moon peeped in through the old windows that evening ; and Hilary, as she

penned a few words at night, of the journal which she always kept for her only brother Maurice, recorded with a grateful heart, that hers was indeed a happy lot.

Yet scarce was the ink dry on the paper where she wrote these lines, than her pleasant dreams were suddenly dissipated, and the very sorrow which she had refused to consider as probable, was presented to her mind. Mrs. Duncan was ill—very ill—alarmingly so; and before that sun which had set in such glory, returned to their view, the eyes that had gazed on it so earnestly were closed in death, and the spirit which had looked out so clear and loving but twelve hours before, had fled to that land which needs no sun to lighten it, and which knows neither change, nor time, nor darkness.

The mother just now in all the prime of womanhood, in her glorious beauty, was cold, and white, and silent, and on her arm lay the tiny marble face of that little being, whose entrance to this world had cost his parents such

a price, and whose stay had been so short, that you wondered why he came at all.

On Hilary devolved the task of making her young sisters acquainted with their loss ; of communicating to them the sad change that one night had occasioned ; for this, when all was over, and her father had withdrawn to the solitude of his own study, she crept softly to their sleeping apartment, and sitting down beside the bed, watched patiently and silently for their first awaking.

Her grief was very quiet, although very deep. In idea she tried to follow the departed, and to realize what she now was, so far as mortal fancy might paint it ; and the glad, solemn, mysterious thought, that that dear one had felt her last grief, suffered her last pain, heaved her last sigh for ever, made it seem even a profanation to indulge regret. It was when she permitted her thoughts to anticipate, that she shuddered and mourned ; it was the future for herself, her sisters, her father, which made her tremble.

How barren and blank it seemed ; the sweet voice which had taught and soothed her, silent now ; the bright smile vanished for ever ; the sunshine of the house gone ; who would fill her place ? Could it be that she so young, so simple, so inexperienced, that she should be called on to attempt this heavy duty ? did it devolve on her to soothe, instruct, watch over her sisters, to think for the household, to comfort her bereaved father, assist in lightening his cares, or sharing his anxieties ? *She* had told her such would be her duty—had bid her reflect on the responsibilities laid on her ; had warned, encouraged, and comforted her—and as she had spoken so, Hilary had felt strong and trustful ; but now—oh ! how miserably weak, ignorant, helpless, and deficient she appeared to herself ; the memory of all her own girlish faults, indolence, thoughtlessness, ignorance, selfish indulgences, idle ways, all the many failings for which she daily judged and condemned herself, rose up in her mind, and seemed to say, “impossible ;” seemed to

whisper to her that her task was harder than she could endure ; that such a life of carefulness and watching, and thought for others, and denial of self, as her mother had depicted for her, *could* not be expected of one so young ; it would wither her youth, and blight her spirit, and darken all the gay happiness which ought to be hers !

Nay, but it was her duty ! it was *God's* will, and as such, it could not be too hard ; her burden would not be greater than she could bear ; more would not be expected of her than she would have power to perform ; could she but fix her eyes aright, and draw strength from the Source of everlasting strength, she should not find it fail ; weak, trembling, insufficient as she was, she need not fear, if she only trusted all to Him, and nothing to herself. And then a voice seemed to whisper to her heart,

“ Child of my love, how have I wearied thee,
Why wilt thou err from me ? ”

and half unconsciously she repeated to herself

the succeeding lines of the same hymn ; there was soothing in the thought.

Yet ever and again, as she grew calmer, came rushing in the painful memory of her loss ; and while she doubted not the wisdom and mercy which had ordered all, and accepted meekly the burden of care which seemed laid on her, her heart ached in bitterness to remember what had been, and what was.

That hour of watching and waiting was intensely trying. She had been occupied all the night, so eagerly and energetically, as to exclude thought or anticipation ; now she could only sit in silence, and weary, worn out, sorrowful, and yet striving to be patient, remain quietly expecting the painful task before her.

She wished to keep awake, and opening her Bible, she tried to fix her eyes and thoughts, and determined so to pass the time ; but blessed sleep stole over her so softly, that she knew not of its approaches, and the tearful eyes closed, the heavy head drooped upon the pillow beside

it, and a deep unconsciousness, a perfect dreamless repose wrapped all the past in oblivion, and brought the refreshment which that young, but willing spirit needed to fulfil her destined task.

“He giveth His beloved sleep.”

Gwyneth was astonished that morning, when, on unclosing her eyes, she discovered her eldest sister, half sitting, half lying on her pillow, dressed as last night, and yet sleeping profoundly, even though tears trembled on her eyelashes, whilst her long and glossy brown hair lay unbound and unbraided over her neck and cheek.

With the thoughtless impulse of her nature, she at once woke her up, and eagerly enquired why she was there, what was the matter, what had made her cry.

That sudden waking bewildered Hilary; the vague, puzzled feeling which so often follows deep sleep, at an unusual time, or in an unaccustomed place, came over her, and for a minute she could remember nothing; not where she

was, nor what had happened, nor why she found herself so strangely sleeping there. She pressed her hands over her eyes ; the full tide of thought and memory came back, and she shrank from the pain she was about to give. But it must be done ! yes, and done by her too, or the task would fall on her father, perhaps ; and done at once, that the first wild agony of tears and grief might be stilled and composed in part, before it came to add to that father's pain and desolation.

She drew the two rosy faces towards her, for Sybil was awake now, and pressing each in her arms, as they knelt or crouched upon the bed, she faltered out the words, through her tears :

“ Mamma has been ill in the night ! ”

Gwyneth fixed her full dark eyes upon her sister's face with a gaze which seemed to ask for more, for some explanation. Sybil gave a frightened start, and said :

“ Oh, Hilary, and how is she now ?—has she been very ill ? ”

“Very,” replied Hilary, forcing back her tears, and speaking gravely, calmly, but very sadly; “very ill indeed; but, Sybil, she is better now!”

Gwyneth still stared at Hilary. “Then why were you crying?” was her question.

“Let me go to her,” said Sybil, struggling to release herself from her sister’s clasp, which, however, now bound her the closer for her efforts to move. Sybil was quiet without a word, only glancing apprehensively at the face hanging over her, with brimming eyelids and quivering lips. Gwyneth exclaimed again impatiently:

“Speak, Hilary, or let me go;—nay, I *will* go to mamma.”

“No, Gwyneth, you cannot,” said the elder sister, laying her forehead down on her sister’s black curls.

“Who says so?—did she? she never refuses to see us! how unkind you are, Hilary.”

“A higher hand than mine, dear Gwyneth—be quiet; you cannot see mamma now, be-

cause—" and such a deep, heart-felt sob stopped her words, that Sybil saw it all in one moment, and quietly turning from them both, laid her head among the pillows, and, except for a slight convulsive shiver now and then, was still and silent.

"Why, why, where is mamma?" cried Gwyneth, fighting with the wild, incomprehensible terror which was overpowering her.

"In Heaven, we trust," said Hilary, regaining her composure in a wonderful way; she pressed one hand upon her heart, made a strong physical effort to put away her grief, and then endeavoured to draw Sybil towards her, hoping that the sight of her tears would touch Gwyneth's heart. For Gwyneth sat still now, with wide open, tearless eyes, and parted lips, and cheeks as colourless as her neck; and her breath came slowly and with difficulty, and in deep, sobbing inspirations, and yet there was no tear; it was not like childish grief, it was the stillness of despair—her face might have belonged to a

woman of thirty, so old it looked at that moment.

Hilary felt helpless at first ; then her whole heart was raised in prayer ; words not her own came to her mind, to express her thoughts and wants, as she prayed that in all her troubles she might put her whole trust and confidence in that Mercy which would not, could not fail.

Sense and feeling returned to Gwyneth, and with it the self-will, the passionate independence of her character. Hilary's arms had relaxed their hold ; she seized the opportunity, escaped from her grasp, and springing from the bed, ran out of the room without so much as pausing to put her feet into her slippers. She crossed the broad passage, and rushing to the door of her mother's chamber, tried violently to force it open. It was locked. Hilary had followed the wilful child, and now laid her hand upon her arm. But Gwyneth screamed, bursting into a furious passion, and uttering cries which resounded through that otherwise silent house.

It was a mixture of feelings, terror undefined, and therefore the more oppressive, grief, vexation, anger—she could not well have told what it was ; but the utterance of these wild screams for a moment relieved her, and appeared to throw off the weight on her heart.

In vain Hilary tried to soothe, to quiet, to command ; her gentle voice was unheard, and Gwyneth, clinging to the handle of the door, and hiding her face on her arms, continued to scream with increasing energy. The old nurse appeared, and tried what she could do ; but interjectory addresses, supplications, and entreaties, were unnoticed, and force made matters worse ; when suddenly the door unclosed from the inside, and Gwyneth was only saved from falling on the floor, by being caught in her father's arms.

The screams stopped instantly ; she gave one glance at his pale sad face, then hid her own upon his shoulder, and indulged in a copious and passionate burst of tears. He held

her quietly and gravely, without a word. Hilary stood with the feelings of a culprit; it seemed to her as if in her very first endeavour, she had failed entirely of all she ought to have done; she blamed herself for her sister's wilfulness, and changing colour and trembling, waited for what might follow.

By degrees Gwyneth's sobs subsided, and she lay quiet in her father's arms.

"What is all this?" said he at length, glancing at his eldest daughter. She could not answer.

Gwyneth whispered, "Mamma—I want mamma." Hilary looked up hastily and fearfully at her father's face. A sadder shade swept over it, like the darkening gloom which precedes the heavy shower; then it passed away, and the quivering lip was still.

"Hilary, love, does she not know?" said he gently, and drawing her close to him.

Hilary conquered the rising inclination to give way to tears; it was a hard struggle first, how-

ever, but she felt she must answer, and to her own surprise her voice came.

“ I tried, papa, to tell her ; but she would not believe—she cannot understand—she is so young, and feels so acutely ; oh, papa ! it was my fault, I did not know how ! ”

“ My poor child,” said he, as he stooped and kissed her forehead, after anxiously scanning her pale cheeks and weary eyes ; “ you have had no rest—you have over-tasked yourself : you should have gone to bed.”

“ Never mind me, papa dear ! I shall do well enough—but let me take Gwyneth back—she will be cold. Come, Gwyneth.”

But the child rebelled again, clung to her father, and seemed about to renew her shrieks.

“ Hush, hush ! this will not do,” said he, “ this must not be. Be still, Gwyneth, and you shall see your mother—once more.”

He stepped into the darkened room, whose grave and solemn aspect hushed the mourner's emotion at once. He opened one shutter a little

way—the bright morning sun streamed in upon the white bed-curtains, and danced upon the toilet-glass. He brought his young daughter, clinging to his arms, to the bed, drew back the curtain, lifted the sheet, and Gwyneth's eyes fell on the cold, still face of her, for whom she had called in vain.

Words cannot describe the feeling of a child thus brought face to face with death. The dead flower appears as a shrivelled atom—the extinguished fire presents an uncouth heap of ashes—the setting sun vanishes from our sight,—these speak for themselves, here the change is real, perceptible, obvious ; but the soul departed leaves the body the same—and yet how different—how slight, yet how immense the alteration. Lost in wonder, unable to realise what is gone, the child gazes in unspeakable awe at what remains—death ! is that death ? it looks but like profound and happy sleep ; for a moment the eye is deceived : but to the touch the truth is at once revealed, and the young finger shrinks, and

never again forgets the strange, cold, unyielding, icy feeling of the dead. For years it will thrill through the frame.

Perhaps it was a hazardous experiment, to place that young and susceptible girl in such a presence. Mr. Duncan did not know what he was doing; he was one of those individuals who cannot in the least understand childhood, its deep feelings, its mysterious impulses, its strange associations, its superstitions taught by Nature herself, its Heavenly breathings, to which it can give neither form nor words. He believed the experiment was perfectly successful, for Gwyneth's tears and cries alike ceased in that solemn presence, and she gazed in quiet, awe-struck, breathless surprise at the form before her.

Softly and gently her father talked to her, whispering of the absent spirit which had gone away for a time, but which might even now be near, how near to them they could not tell; and of that day when this spirit should return again, and that fair form, now motionless, cold, inani-

mate as marble itself, should arise once more to everlasting life. And then he knelt with Gwyneth in his arms, and prayed that they might all meet hereafter in that home of everlasting peace, where no partings come. She was very still and subdued as he carried her back from the room, and gave her to the nurse's charge, and they did not know the effect that sight had produced on her, for she could not speak of her feelings ; but, sleeping or waking, that face for weeks was before her eyes, and the coldness of death seemed ever on her lips and cheeks, such as she had felt it, when, at her father's bidding, she had pressed a last kiss on the corpse ; and she would shrink into corners of the house or garden, to cry and shudder alone, when none saw her, and muse in silence upon what her mother was.

Sybil was different ; she clung to Hilary, she hardly dared to be alone ; but with a pallid face, and swimming eyes, and little trembling hands, she followed her sister all day long ; and never

wearied of talking of her mother ; of her wishes, her tastes, her goodness ; every action seemed referred to that object ; and she spoke of her as one that was absent only for a short time, who would soon return to claim their obedience again.

Gwyneth would turn pale, shiver, and, if possible, quit the room at the slightest mention of her mother's name ; nor could Hilary's utmost efforts win from her the feelings that oppressed her.

Of course, as time passed, it brought the usual mitigation of acute sorrow : Sybil learnt to speak with dry eyes of the departed, Gwyneth taught herself to bear the thought without visible demonstrations of feeling ; but the effect remained upon their characters ; Sybil was more soft and dependent, Gwyneth more reserved in her general demeanour, whilst the fire which burnt below that outward crust of indifference and calmness was but the fiercer for its concealment.

CHAPTER II.

“Blowing between the stems, the forest air
Had loosened the brown curls of Vivian’s hair,
Which played o’er her flushed cheeks; and her blue eyes
Sparkled with mocking glee and exercise.”

ISEULT OF BRITTANY.

It was about two months after the death of Mrs. Duncan, when the cheering news arrived at the old Vicarage that the ship in which Maurice Duncan was serving had reached Chatham, and was to be paid off immediately.

The letter was indeed a sunbeam thrown upon a gloomy path. Some change was greatly wanted at home. Mr. Duncan was a man of deep and true piety, but of little judgment in worldly matters. It would not be easy to find

one less fitted to guide aright four girls like his daughters : he had no idea of what was good or hurtful for them. In education, indeed, both intellectual and religious, he could safely lead them—but of their physical natures he was quite ignorant. He had no quickness of perception. He did not see that Gwyneth was becoming daily more gloomy and abstracted, yielding to fanciful terrors, all the more powerful because she dared not speak of them. He did not discover that Sybil was giving way to indolence and repining, loving to indulge in visionary dreams of future happiness, or in retrospective pictures of past bliss, but shrinking from real, actual exertion, and the toils of every-day life. Still less did he perceive that Hilary was working beyond her strength, and sinking under a weight of responsibility which she felt too vividly to endure safely.

She was keenly sensible of her sisters' defects ; she felt them with an acuteness and a self-condemnation almost morbid in its excess ; it seemed to her as if they were entirely her own fault, and

she saw that, however she might guard their health, minister to their comfort, and promote their pleasures, she was still failing in the more important part of her stepmother's charge, whilst these evils were allowed to increase and overshadow their characters. Yet she could do nothing to repress them by herself, and she was not seconded by her father. Not that he wished or intended to thwart her; he doted on her far too much for that; but he was quite ignorant of the best manner of training children, or of the importance due to the small points of which Hilary thought so much. He secretly attributed the stress she laid on such things, to the over-anxiety of a new-made governess, precise about unnecessary particulars, from the scruples of a young responsibility; and when Hilary had said as much as duty and respect permitted, and urged her opinions with the small degree of earnestness which diffidence and humility allowed her, he would reply with a kind smile and a kiss, "Very true, my love; you are a good girl

to think so much about your sisters, and I hope they will be grateful. I do not know what I should do without you." But the things to which she objected, the indulgences which she reprehended, were continued just the same.

Theoretically, he would tell the children to obey Hilary ; practically, he would encourage the contrary conduct. Not that there was any positive rebellion—there was no passion, ill-will, or disobedience apparent ; these would have been instantly suppressed ; but these were not necessary to gain her ends, Sybil found, and her nature was too soft to use them. So when she and Hilary differed about her occupations, her manner of employing her time, or her amusements, an appeal to her father, a smile and a kiss, always won him to her side of the argument, and gained for her the right of following her own taste, rather than submitting to the act of self-denial which her sister had proposed. Mr. Duncan only saw that both acts were alike innocent, why then should she not take her choice ?

Hilary saw further ; for she not only reflected on the results of self-indulgence, but she felt keenly how her power was annihilated, and her actual authority annulled ; all the more keenly, because it was owing to an affection she could not bear to blame, even in thought.

One of Sybil's greatest indulgences was, in drawing her father into long conversations respecting her deceased mother, recapitulating her virtues, and dwelling on their own loss. Had he possessed judgment enough to turn such recollections to good effect, to increase the child's desire of excellence, by the memory of what her mother had been, to strengthen her faith and love, by pointing out how these had been a support in trouble, and a comfort in sickness or pain, and to incite her onwards in the same course by the wish of meeting again—there might have been more reason in his conduct ; but this was not the case, and every such discussion seemed only to soften and weaken her nerves, make her more indolently dreamy, and

bring on floods of regretful tears, such as she ought to have checked as wilful, not encouraged as amiable and affectionate.

Conversations such as these only drove Gwyneth more completely apart, and made her shudder in silence. If, when the girls were riding or walking with their father, as they did almost every day, Sybil fell into this strain, her sister would draw back, and endeavour to escape beyond hearing; or if this were impossible, her white cheeks, and firm-closed lips, and slightly knitted brows, told plainly to Hilary how she was inwardly suffering.

It was too much for Hilary; the household cares, the anxiety for her sisters, the watchfulness and broken rest which Nest, the youngest, often caused her, for she had taken the little one to her room at night, and watched her as her mother had once done; and then the unwearied attention to her father, the arrangement of his books, papers, and accounts, all which she took up where Mrs. Duncan had laid them down;

the superintendence of the village school ; the parochial cares ; all these fell heavily on her young head, on her willing, but over-anxious mind. The discipline, however, was good for her, and taught her many things ; she saw much was beyond her power, and that what she could not accomplish, she must be content to leave undone ; she saw many things which should not be, and from clearly ascertaining the evil, knew better what was good to seek.

And then at length, when she had taught herself to submit with patience, and to bear what she could not remedy, and to ask, and look for help for what she could not supply by her own power, help and comfort were sent to her.

Maurice came home : within ten days of their hearing of his arrival in England, his ship was paid off, and he was free ; it was only for a limited period, however, for not having yet served his time as a midshipman, and being little more than eighteen, he had determined not to be idle, and had applied for immediate em-

ployment. Consequently he had but six weeks' leave to spend at home, after an absence of nearly four years.

The delight with which Hilary looked forward to the arrival of her brother, was a stimulus to every power of her mind ; and the ecstacy with which she threw her arms around the tall, slight, graceful youth on his presenting himself, seemed at the moment a compensation for all past anxiety and wrong. Maurice was returned to her, and returned with the same loving smile, and dancing eyes, and cheerful voice which had dwelt in her memory for so large a portion of her life ; he was the same ! could she be thankful enough for this blessing, not only for her own, but still more for her father's sake.

How delighted she was to watch her father's eye brighten, and his voice assume a more lively tone, as Maurice laughed and talked, questioned and commented, with the gaiety of youth at home and happy. For Maurice was always

happy ; his boyhood had been all joy and sunshine, so far as he could remember ; his school life had been cheerful and pleasant ; and his ship ! oh, that had been the happiest on the station ; the captain the most considerate, the first lieutenant the best fellow in the world, and all his messmates, great and small, appeared to deserve the same character ; and now, though for a short time, the blank in their home was felt and mourned by him, and he looked grave when he saw the empty chair and the disused work-table placed back in a corner : yet his joyous spirit soon rose again, and with so many blessings left, so much still unchanged, he said and felt it would be ungrateful to repine that one had been taken.

So, when, in company of Hilary, he had visited the spot where his step-mother was buried, and talked with his sister of her last hours, and heard what they had since discovered from her written papers, that she had been warned by a physician some months before, that, in all human probability, her days were numbered, and that she

would not survive her next confinement, and when they had recounted her kindness and her virtues, and shed tears together at the memory of past times, and made a solemn engagement to return her affection for them as children, if possible, in double care and attention to the interests of her daughters, Maurice turned his thoughts to other objects, and endeavoured to show his reverence for the dead by his consideration for the living. Cheerfulness was what was needed in his dear old home ; cheerfulness, to restore the tone of his father's spirits, to cheer Sybil, to excite Gwyneth, and, above all, to aid and comfort and sustain his darling Hilary.

Maurice Duncan had the happy, lively temper ascribed by common report to sailors ; but he had not the wild *insouciance*, the careless, reckless, or coarse habits often attributed to them. He was delicately, exquisitely refined in all his feelings ; his behaviour to his father was perfect in the respectful attention, engaging confidence, and invariable consideration he showed him. It

was a sight worth seeing, too, to view him playing with his little sisters ; Nest perched in the back of the old large arm-chair, leaning over his shoulder, and bringing her bright dark eyes, and ebony curls, in such charming contrast with his genuine Saxon features ; whilst the two elder ones each occupied a knee, and drew an arm close round their waists. Then he would pour out long tales of India, China, or some other distant land, of tornadoes and breakers, coral-reefs and palm-trees, of wild shooting excursions, and narrow escapes from danger—to all which the children listened with wonder and almost awe ; and Hilary sat smiling by, with bright eyes dancing in joy and thankfulness, and Mr. Duncan paused over his book, and listened with feelings scarcely less moved and excited than his children.

But, above all, it was beautiful to see how he would wait on Hilary, attend to her least wish, accommodate himself to her habits and occupations, relieve her of every burden he could take

upon himself, or share it with her by his sympathy when he could not. Without any verbal communication, he discovered in what respects she was overworked, and to some extent contrived to remedy the evil.

Without seeming to find fault, he contrived to arouse his father's attention to what was wrong, to what was unfair on her, or pressed too much on one so young. His devoted attention to her wishes, the importance he attached to instant obedience to her words, had a great effect on the younger ones ; be the game ever so amusing, the romp ever so exciting, or the tale ever so deeply interesting, all was quitted the moment Hilary spoke ; and this conduct in one older and much taller than Hilary herself, could not fail to produce most beneficial results on the children's habits and actions. Long after he was gone, his sister felt the good effects of his care and kindness.

No summer sea sparkling in the sunshine was ever more bright and buoyant than his spirit ;

and not even those same waves could exceed his determined energy of character, his steady perseverance in right, or the gradual but resistless force with which he won his way through impediments, and silently swept away obstructions and prejudices.

One Saturday afternoon, the young people all set out together for a long ramble through the forest, the two girls on their ponies, Hilary and Maurice arm-in-arm, an arrangement which suited them admirably, as affording pleasure to the young ones, and securing at the same time the luxury of confidential communication between the brother and sister. Thus they strolled along, the children choosing the way, and leading them down beautiful glades carpeted with mossy turf, and over-arched by the old elms, and beech, and oak, where thickets of holly, underwood, and fern made what Maurice called reefs, promontories, islands, or sheltering bays; winding about sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another, at length they were entirely beyond the knowledge of

any of the party, and it suddenly became a matter of doubt which way they were to turn. Hilary had gone on, leaning, figuratively as well as actually, on her brother; and it had never occurred to her, that with all his experience, and knowledge, and learning, he might not be so well qualified to guide them as to deserve this implicit credit. They all came to a stand-still at last, and looked about them with different degrees of wonder and uneasiness. There was no track, no mark of footsteps, no sound of man, to guide them. Hilary sat down on a fallen tree, puzzled and yet amused, whilst Maurice and her sisters made little excursions in different directions, to endeavour to discover some leading indications. They had gone a little out of sight, and she was looking towards the point from which she expected them to return, when she heard footsteps approaching, and turning round, saw, through a thicket of thorn, hazel, and holly, a person whom at first she believed to be her brother.

“Maurice, have you found the path?” ex-

claimed she, eagerly ; but the next moment she perceived it was a stranger who advanced, and who, springing over the intervening underwood of fern and bramble, presently stood by her side.

“ I beg your pardon,” said Hilary, as she looked at him ; “ I thought it was my brother when I spoke.”

She addressed him with an easy grace and courtesy, which was very attractive ; and the intruder replied, with as much eagerness as politeness permitted,

“ I have not seen your brother ; can I be of any service to you ? may I infer from your question that you have lost your way ?”

“ Indeed we have,” replied Hilary, frankly ; “ well as I know the forest generally, I am quite puzzled now, and my brother and sisters are gone a little way, to try and find a path.”

“ If you will allow me to remain with you till their return,” replied the stranger, “ I shall be most happy to act as your guide. In which direction do you wish to proceed ?”

“We belong to Hurstdene,” replied Hilary ;
“I am the clergyman’s daughter ; perhaps you
know the name of Mr. Duncan !”

“Perfectly ; though I have not the pleasure
of his acquaintance ; but you are a long way
from Hurstdene ; five miles, I should think, at
least.”

“I have no idea where we are,” replied Miss
Duncan, looking round ; “I never was so far on
this side of the wood. Is there any hamlet or
village near us ?”

“I think my house must be the nearest in-
habited spot,” said the gentleman ; “perhaps
you may know that by name, ‘The Ferns,’ and
that may give you some idea where you are.”

“Oh yes, I know the gates and fences of
‘the Ferns’ very well,” answered Hilary, looking
with a sort of modified and restrained curiosity
at her companion ; “but I had no idea it was
inhabited ; I thought the owner was abroad
still.”

“I was abroad,” said he, smiling, “until very

lately ; but just at present I am living on my own domain. Is this your brother approaching ?”

Hilary looked round : Maurice and the children approached quickly, evidently surprised to find she had a companion.

“ We cannot see any path,” cried Gwyneth ; “ what shall we do ? we are quite lost.” She looked exceedingly frightened.

“ Maurice,” said Hilary, stepping forwards to meet him, “ this is Mr. Huyton, of ‘ the Ferns.’ I believe I am right,” added she, looking with a sort of apologetic smile at the stranger.

“ I am happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Duncan,” said he, frankly holding out his hand, “ and still more happy to think that I can be of service to your party. I learn from Miss Duncan that you have lost your way, and I believe I can direct you to the road home. But do you know how far you are ?”

“ I am so great a stranger here,” replied Maurice, “ that it is easy for me to lose myself,

and I have no bearings to direct me : so we shall be really obliged if you can set us right."

"But will Miss Duncan be able to walk back five or six miles?" enquired Mr. Huyton.

"Hilary, dear, you cannot do that, I am sure," said Maurice, anxiously.

"Necessity knows no law," was Hilary's cheerful reply. "I am not so very tired ; besides, I can ride a little to rest myself, you know ; neither Sybil nor Gwyneth have walked at all !"

Both girls, who had been gazing most attentively at the stranger, now cried out that Hilary should ride when she liked ; all the way, if she liked.

"Then your shortest way home," replied Mr. Huyton, "is through my park, and out into the road which skirts the side of it ; that will lead you direct to Hurstdene."

The children looked delighted, and whispered, audibly enough, how they should like to go

through "the Ferns;" they had never been inside the gates.

This point was soon settled, and he led them along a green alley of the forest, until they came to the park palings. The fence was of the wildest description. Ivy, clematis, and woodbine, mixed in the utmost profusion with bryony, bind-weed, and other climbing plants; overshadowed by gigantic ferns and gorse, which might almost be classed amongst trees. Over these, huge forest-trees swung their ancient branches, and made a sort of twilight of the spot. The children wondered what would come next; but Mr. Huyton, drawing a key from his pocket, and pushing aside a tangled screen of green boughs, soon threw open a little door, which at first had hardly been perceptible, and the party found themselves within the park.

A narrow path, which seemed but rarely trodden, leading between thickets of tall fern, picturesque old thorns, and ancient hollies, opened before them. Eager and amused, the girls

pressed their ponies along, at a quick pace; Hilary still leant on her brother's arm, whilst Mr. Huyton walked by her side, and assisted Maurice to hold back the encroaching brambles, or overhanging prickly branches, which might have impeded her progress.

A turn in the path brought them suddenly in sight of the house, and then the owner, turning to Hilary, said,—

“If you will trust yourself to the wild style of housekeeping which a bachelor hermit's establishment affords, you will come in and rest yourself, Miss Duncan?”

Hilary at first declined, but their companion would not be refused, and Maurice was so charmed with the manners of their new acquaintance, and with the style of his conversation, that he seconded his proposal, when, of course, Hilary yielded.

“Thank you, very much,” exclaimed Mr Huyton, warmly; “but I must tell you that to rest in my house is but a part of my plan. You

must let me have the pleasure of taking you all home in my carriage. I am sure Miss Duncan is too fatigued for more exertion ; and perhaps the young ladies would not mind exchanging their saddle for a seat in the britschka ?”

“ Oh no, we cannot think of giving such trouble,” exclaimed Hilary, quite shocked at the idea.

“ Besides, there are the ponies !” suggested Maurice.

“ Never mind them, the groom shall bring them home in the evening,” replied Mr. Huyton ; and without listening to any further objections, he called to a man who was standing by the gate of the stable-yard, close to which their path led them, and gave orders for the carriage to be got ready.

Their path now emerged into a beautiful triple avenue, which extended at least half a mile from the front of the house, along which Hilary’s eye glanced with intense admiration, and a low exclamation of “ beautiful !” escaped her.

“ My ancestors must have loved trees,” said Mr. Huyton ; “ there are avenues extending from each side of this huge, unwieldy house. I should like to show them to you some day.”

“ Is this the front ?” enquired Maurice.

“ Yes, I fancy this is ; but the house is square, and either side looks like the front ; each has an entrance in the same heavy, substantial style ; but I like the south rooms, so I have chosen this part for my residence. Let me welcome you to my domicile,” added he, smiling with captivating grace on Hilary, as he pushed open the door, and ushered her into a broad entrance passage. He then turned to assist the others from their ponies, and after directing a stable helper to lead off the animals, he took the hands of the girls and led them in.

“ Oh how charming !” cried both Sybil and Gwyneth, as they glanced along the passage which opened into a great hall, occupying the centre of the house. They caught sight of a wide branching staircase with a heavy balustrade ;

of sundry trophies of the chase, and ancient arms and armour, of various unknown articles, and not a few packing-cases and great boxes, standing about in extraordinary confusion.

Mr. Huyton seemed amused at their wondering admiration. He opened a door on the right. "Here is my room," said he, "no other is quite habitable yet; I have not been home long enough to get another furnished."

"We never heard you were at home at all," said Sybil; "when did you come, sir?"

"About a month ago," replied he, as he pushed up a large easy chair, and made Hilary seat herself on it; "I will tell you all about it presently, but you must let me attend to your sister's comfort first, will you not?"

He rang the bell as he spoke, and then looked round to see what more he could do for her convenience, bringing her a footstool, and drawing down the blind, that the sun might not shine on her head; and shewing, by his whole air and manner, how anxious he was for her comfort.

“Bring some wine and biscuits, or bread and butter, or something,” said, he as a servant presented himself at the door.

“Not for us, Mr. Huyton,” exclaimed Hilary, eagerly; “pray do not take the trouble; we *never* touch wine, except Maurice, and I do not suppose *he* would either, now.”

“Some ladies do not, I know,” replied he, gently; “then bring coffee as soon as possible, and tell Leblanc to make it, that it may be good.”

The servant disappeared, and Hilary found it vain to contend against such determined politeness and hospitality.

“Those are beautiful specimens of wood-carving, are they not?” said their host to Maurice, who was examining some book-shelves at one end of the room; “they are for my library—nothing is in its place about the house. Indeed I have hardly had time to get my things unpacked yet.”

“You have always been abroad, Mr. Huyton?” said Sybil, coming up to his side.

“Yes,” was his reply with a smile, as he looked at her face of curiosity. “I have spent twenty-five years, my whole life indeed, abroad; but I mean to settle in England now, and make this my home. Look at these beautiful cameos, shall we show them to your sister? would she like to see them?”

“Oh yes! Hilary has some of her own, which I know she likes very much,” replied Sybil, eagerly.

“But she would like these best,” said Gwyneth, decidedly; pointing to a book of drawings, between the leaves of which she had furtively peeped. It was a collection of drawings, copied from some of the most celebrated works of good artists, all done in a masterly style.

“She shall have her choice,” replied their host, looking much pleased; “you bring the book, and I will carry the case of cameos.”

Again Hilary begged him not to trouble him-

self, but without any effect: a small table was placed beside her, and one article after another produced for her amusement. Her admiration of the coloured drawings was extreme, and evidently highly gratifying to her host.

“How much my father would enjoy these,” said she to Maurice.

“If you think them worth the trouble of carrying home with you,” said Mr. Huyton, “I shall be only too much flattered to lend them to you. I can see, by your careful handling of them, the book would be as safe with you as with me.”

“They are exquisitely beautiful,” said Hilary, gazing with intense admiration at a copy of one of Raphael’s best works. “Who was the artist?”

“I made the copies myself,” was his reply; an answer which brought Hilary’s eyes on him with a look of reverence and admiration.

The coffee was soon brought in, most excellent of its kind; indeed, whatever they saw, belonging to Mr. Huyton, which could be sup-

posed finished, appeared as perfect as possible. Although it was evident that as yet hardly any thing was in its place, and the whole house had the air of having been so long neglected, that Hilary could not wonder that its progress towards order and classification had gone on slowly.

“I shall get on by degrees,” said he, in answer to some observation of hers, relative to the labour before him. “By and bye, when the library has been new floored and cleaned, we will have these carved book frames put up, of which that is a specimen. But I like to superintend the whole. It doubles the value of a place to arrange it all oneself: unless one had the happiness of falling in with some second mind and fancy, which could sympathise with, and enter into one’s own peculiarities and wishes.”

“And do you not find the noise and bustle of workmen disagreeable, Mr. Huyton?” asked Hilary.

“I do not mind it, and when I am tired I go

out in the forest, or stroll about, and form plans for the ground and gardens."

"There used to be a famous garden here always," observed Maurice; "many a time have I bought peaches and nectarines at the Lodge-gates, in former years."

"These windows look up that beautiful avenue, I see," said Hilary; "what magnificent timber you have about here."

"Yes, and so quaintly planted," replied he; "one wonders at the taste. Straight rows seem the prevailing idea. Rows of oaks, rows of cedars, rows of larch trees, varied by quadrangles of enormous yews, or of double rows of limes, which must be delicious in summer. Miss Duncan, I do not wish to hurry you away, but whenever you please, the carriage is at your service."

Hilary rose to prepare for her departure. The children cast many a longing, lingering look towards the unexplored regions of the house, which Mr. Huyton observing, told them that

they should come again some other day, and they would have a good game at hide and seek all over the house ; a promise which they resolved not to allow him to forget.

The most unqualified admiration was excited by the beautiful horses and carriage, which stood at the door, Sybil declaring they were just what he ought to have, and Gwyneth whispering to Maurice, that the afternoon's adventure was quite like a fairy tale.

"Are you going to drive, Mr. Huyton?" asked Sybil, as he was preparing to hand Hilary in.

"Not if you can make room for me inside," was his answer ; "do you think you two little girls could sit by your sister without squeezing her too much?"

"Easily, easily," cried Sybil, springing up and down on the elastic cushions of the carriage. "Oh, Hilary, is it not delicious? if we had but such a carriage as this for every day!"

Maurice preferred going on the box, when it

came to the point, so that after all there was plenty of room; and Sybil and Gwyneth were able to change sides in the carriage every five minutes, a process which any one less patiently indulgent than Hilary would soon have stopped.

Mr. Huyton, however, sitting opposite to her, kept her in such pleasant conversation on really interesting subjects, that she had not much time to be worried by any restlessness of her sisters; and the half-hour's drive passed only too rapidly. He was as enthusiastic an admirer of scenery as she herself, and with an eye and taste cultivated by familiarity with the best examples; yet he did not despise or look down contemptuously on English scenery, or an English climate, because the one could not show the Alps, nor the other boast of the bright suns of Italy or Greece. The small specimen that he had seen was enough to give him most favourable impressions, and he was equally prepared to like the women of his country. His expectations were high, but he had not as yet met with a disappointment.

“I am so glad of that,” replied Hilary, with a simplicity and candour which told how little she suspected that she was the first English lady he had conversed with since his return from abroad. The idea of his intending a compliment to her, was as far as possible from her mind.

Mr. Duncan was naturally a good deal surprised, when he perceived the style in which his children had returned home ; but nothing could be more cordial and grateful than his thanks, and his invitation to their new acquaintance to walk in and share their tea. Sybil and Gwyneth, too, seconded the invitation with all their might ; but Hilary was engrossed with little Nest, and either did not or would not attend ; he was not sure which was the case.

“I must say good evening,” said he, approaching the end of the room, where she was sitting on a sofa, with her arms around the little one. “Is this another of your sisters, Miss Duncan ? I never saw more lovely children ; and yet how unlike they are to you !”

Nest fixed her large black eyes on Mr. Huyton, with a perfect appreciation of his compliment. Her sister coloured, looked grave, and then rising, held out her hand, only replying, "Good evening, then, and we are so much obliged to you !"

"The obligation is to me," replied he, gracefully ; then stooping to kiss the beautiful little face, which half-shyly, half-coquettishly, rested against Hilary's shoulder, he added, "It has been a bright afternoon to me, and the acquaintance I have formed I shall not easily relinquish !"

No sooner was he gone, than the whole party joined in one unanimous chorus in praise of their new friend, his house, his trees, his manners, his carriage, and his coffee.

Maurice was as enthusiastic as the girls, and the whole of tea-time was spent in recapitulating the charms and virtues of Mr. Huyton. In short, the entire thing had so much the air of a romance, and they had so rarely met with any

adventure before, that enough could not be said in praise, or wonder, or delight.

After tea, Hilary produced the book of drawings, and they were thoroughly appreciated by Mr. Duncan, who had, in his youth, made a tour abroad, and taken the opportunity of cultivating a natural taste and love for painting.

In the middle of this occupation, a message was brought in, that Mr. Huyton's groom had brought home the ponies, and also a basket of peaches and grapes from "the Ferns;" sent specially directed to Mr. Maurice, to remind him of old times; an attention to her brother's pleasure which charmed Hilary more than all the rest of the transaction together.

CHAPTER III.

“ Her ’haviour had the morning’s fresh, clear grace,
The spirit of the woods was in her face,
She looked so witching fair——”

ISEULT OF BRITTANY.

SYBIL’S lessons, the next Monday morning, were much disturbed by sundry dreams and visions ; she was possessed with the idea that Mr. Huyton would drive over in his beautiful carriage again to-day, and perhaps take them all back to the Ferns, for the promised game of hide and seek. She was listening every moment for the sound of wheels, and trying to catch a glimpse of the carriage driving over the green, towards the house.

After all, Mr. Huyton came, but so quietly, that Sybil was perfectly ignorant when he entered the house. He rode over, rather early for a morning visit, and met Maurice on the green, who put his horse in the stable, and took the visitor into the garden, to wait till lesson-time was over, as he knew Hilary did not like to be interrupted in her teaching. They were all much surprised, in consequence, when, just as the children were putting away their books, the two young men walked into the room. None of the party was sorry to see Mr. Huyton; he seemed to have such genuine pleasure in the intercourse, that it naturally communicated itself to the whole family.

Mr. Huyton, indeed, was delighted with the acquaintance. The simplicity, frankness, and refinement of the whole family enchanted him. Weary of the fashionable manners, and artificial style of living, prevalent among the circles in foreign capitals, which he had frequented, there was something bewitching in this little glimpse

of nature and truth now presented to him. Of English society he knew nothing, save such as he had met abroad, seldom the best, or under the best aspects: and without troubling himself to discover in what the peculiar charm consisted, he resolved to cultivate the acquaintance of the Duncans, and make himself at home with them.

He was surprised to find in a girl of Hilary's age, and educated completely in retirement, such a degree of elegance, and what he called high-breeding. It was a wonder to him how she learnt a style of courtesy which is sometimes wanting under what he would have considered much more favourable circumstances. He had yet to learn that real Christianity is the best school of good manners; and that the rule of doing as we would be done by, secures that substance, of which politeness and refinement can only give the shadow or the reflection.

She was so unconsciously pretty too, with all her delightful simplicity; so unintentionally

graceful, and quietly elegant, that he never discovered how plain her dress was, nor how slightly it conformed to the prevalent fashion. The black close-fitting gown, with the clean little white collar, seemed made precisely to show off her slender form and fair skin; and the pretty brown hair, with its long curl, just put back behind a small delicately-shaped ear, and the rich braid forming a Grecian knot, needed no coiffeur to make it look smoother, more glossy, or more becoming to the classic shape of her little head.

Without forming any definite ideas as to the ultimate results likely to ensue, he entered at once with youthful ardour upon an acquaintance so accidentally formed. It was not likely that a young man of large fortune and prepossessing person and manners, would long be left to the solitude of his own country house, nor obliged to pick up his acquaintance at random in the forest; but he was sufficiently peculiar and independent in his tastes and habits, to

take his own line and adhere to it ; and for the present, his chosen line lay in associating almost exclusively with the Duncans. Prudent fathers of families, and speculating brothers, hoping for future *battues* or other delights, made visits at the Ferns, as soon as it was generally known that the owner was resident there ; and, thanks to the necessity of eating and drinking, and the circulating nature of butchers and bakers, as well as gossip in a country place, that was pretty soon after his arrival.

No one had, however, as yet got further than the door-way, the answer being apparently stereotyped, that the house was in confusion, and Mr. Huyton did not receive company. The Duncans alone had been permitted to enter. They were perfectly unconscious of the superior privilege accorded them. They were out of the way of gossip, and had few visitors except the farmers' and cottagers' wives of their own village. Mr. Huyton himself was the only landed proprietor in their parish, and on that account might be

considered as belonging to them. The lay-impropriator resided six or seven miles from them ; he was a man generally well-spoken of, and the father of two daughters, but there had never been any intercourse between them.

In short, Mr. Huyton's appearance amongst them was like the discovery of a new and wonderful comet to an enthusiastic astronomer ; and he could not be more ready for the acquaintance, than they were to admit and encourage it.

Had Mr. Duncan been really a prudent father, he might have hesitated, perhaps, to admit to such intimacy a young man of whom they only knew the name and residence ; but his charity made him literally think no evil ; and the young men proved so congenial to each other in general taste, that they speedily became as nearly inseparable as the five miles between their respective homes would permit.

Maurice would have been constantly at the Ferns, if the owner of that place had not been

so often at Hurstdene ; and the little girls never seemed to think of riding in any other direction, unless he was with them to guide them in a different path.

All his plans were brought over to the Vicarage, to be discussed and re-arranged according to the tastes of his friends there ; nominally of the whole family, actually of Hilary herself, in most cases, with the assistance of her father's opinion.

The number of nutting parties, whortle-berry parties, and other rambling, scrambling expeditions in which he was engaged by the children, was wonderful. It was apparently all the same to him, whether their object was to pick berries or make sketches, he was an adept at either, and he soon constituted himself drawing-master to the whole party ; and presented Sybil with a stock of materials for the work, which amply supplied, as it was perhaps intended it should, both her sisters also.

Then he was delighted to encourage Gwy-

neth's natural and native love of music, and finding their only instrument was just such a piano as you might expect to find in an old-fashioned country vicarage, he transferred to her, as a birth-day present, a small but beautiful instrument, which he had ordered for his own room at the Ferns, but which he succeeded in persuading Mr. Duncan, it would greatly oblige him if he could now get rid of. There were some scruples about accepting so valuable a present, but Mr. Huyton had his own way after all. If he expected Gwyneth to be able to play the music which accompanied the piano, he must have formed wonderful ideas of the capabilities of the child ; but Hilary revelled in Beethoven and Mozart for months afterwards, and it certainly was an advantage to Gwyneth herself, to *hear* such good music as was now placed within her reach.

So the weeks sped away, fast and bright, as the evening rainbow fades from the sky, until Maurice's leave was over, and the sad eve of

parting arrived. It was a subject which had never been discussed in Mr. Huyton's presence, and one which had not occurred to his mind ; so that it took him quite by surprise when, late one afternoon, on arriving at the Vicarage, after an accidental absence of nearly forty-eight hours, he found Sybil and Gwyneth with very sober faces, sitting in the porch, and was told by them, with tearful eyes, that Maurice was really to go early to-morrow, so Hilary was helping him pack his trunk.

The door of the little room on one side of the hall was opened as they spoke, and Maurice called out, " Oh, Charles ! is that you ? I began to think I should have to leave without seeing you again ! "

The visitor entered the room, and there he found Maurice sitting on a portmanteau, in the hope that his weight would bring the two sides into fair proximity to each other ; whilst Hilary was half kneeling, half sitting on the floor, from which she made a sort of motion to rise as he

entered, looking at him with very pale cheeks, and mournful eyes. "I had no idea, my dear fellow! you were going so soon," said Charles Huyton, quietly placing himself beside his friend on the portmanteau. "Oh the misery of packing up," added he, taking a curious look round the room at the various litters it contained.

"Well, we have done for to-day," replied Maurice; "I never got through it so nicely before; but Hilary, dear, we will rest now. I say, Charles, where have you been?"

"I had to go to Hitchinboro', about some business, and could not come earlier. Miss Duncan, is it too late for a walk? I had hoped to be in time to finish that sketch of the old oak tree."

"I don't know," said Hilary, trying to rouse herself. "What do you say, Maurice?"

"If my father will come," replied he. "I should not like to leave him for the whole evening; and he talked of wanting to visit those cottages by the tree."

Hilary said she would go and see ; and rising, left the room.

“ Poor dear girl !” said Maurice, looking after her ; “ do you know what it is to leave such dear ones, Charles ?—I could cry just now with pleasure.”

“ Your sister will miss you immensely,” replied Mr. Huyton, “ but she has so uncommon a degree of self-control, and firmness of character, that I have no doubt but she will bear up under it with vigour.”

“ Hilary is not the least like any other girl I ever saw,” replied Maurice, thoughtfully, “ and I have seen a good many, one way or another ; she is just a hundred times better than any one I ever came across ; you might live with her ten years, and never know her do a selfish or an unkind thing. I really do not believe she ever thinks of herself.”

“ It is certainly rare to see one so young, so thoughtful and womanly in her mind,” said

Charles Huyton, earnestly. "I think you told me she is not yet eighteen?"

"Oh! no, only just turned seventeen; most girls are mere children at her age. To see how she teaches and manages the little ones, and cares for my father, and attends to all the old women and babies in the parish; knowing exactly who wants a flannel petticoat, or a pig, or a dose of rhubarb; it is really something wonderful! I do not believe she ever forgets anything, from one Sunday to another!"

"Except herself," replied the visitor.

"Ay, except herself, in the right sense. I say, Charles, though, I have seen many girls forget themselves, when I could have wished them a little more memory, for their own sakes, and you never see Hilary do that."

"Never—I wonder you can make up your mind to leave your family," observed Charles Huyton, with the utter unconsciousness of the laws of necessity which young men of large

fortunes, independent of guardians, sometimes feel.

“What would you have?” said Maurice. “I must work, and, indeed, I love my profession; and but for these leave-takings, have nothing to complain of. If I am only lucky enough to get promoted by and bye, when I am older, Hilary and I will settle down together, in some little cottage on the sea-shore, and live on my half-pay and her fortune together; and be a regular old cosy brother and sister. That’s my notion of happiness. I don’t think either Hilary or I shall ever want to marry!”

“Don’t you?” observed his friend, with a somewhat incredulous smile.

“I only hope she will not over-work herself; she is too anxious about every thing; and with nobody to help her, the three children come heavily upon her. Charles, you will come and see them sometimes, when I am gone?”

“Sometimes!” replied Mr. Huyton, quietly.

Maurice turned round abruptly. “I am

selfish for her sake, perhaps; but you must excuse me; don't come if you do not like however. I thought perhaps—but never mind, I daresay you have plenty to do, much pleasanter than dawdling about here with such rustics as we all are.”

“There is nothing I like better, upon my honour. My great fear has been, that your absence would make a difference—that perhaps I should not be admitted. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to think there need be no change.”

“No change! well, I do not say that; but let Hilary settle the change for herself. I only wish you could help her teach the children a little,” added he, laughing; “but I am afraid you cannot quite take my place as tutor.”

“We will see,” was the reply gravely given.

The little girls came running in, equipped for walking, and summoned the two young men to join Mr. Duncan and his daughter, who were out at the gate, settling Nest in the pannier

of a pony, that being the way in which that young lady made her excursions with her sisters ; and on this occasion she was not to be left behind.

There was a good deal of desultory conversation passed between the family, not the least connected with the subject which occupied their minds ; *that* was too sorrowful to be dwelt on ; and both Maurice and Hilary thought more of their father, and of amusing him, than of indulging their own low spirits at the moment.

When they came to the Great Oak, it was settled that Maurice should accompany Mr. Duncan as he went round to visit a few scattered huts and hovels, inhabited by a wild and somewhat lawless race of wood-cutters, brick-makers, and poachers, who had located themselves in this secluded spot, whilst Hilary and Sybil sat down, under Mr. Huyton's protection, to finish a sketch of the old tree.

“ How well it looks this evening,” observed he ; “ the tawny russet shade which has tinged

the leaves, shows well against those orange-coloured beech-trees which back it up. If you can but catch the effect of that slanting sunbeam falling on those bright leaves, and tinging the trunk with gold ! It is made for a picture !”

Hilary laid down her pencil and gazed abstractedly at the scene, gazed till the tears gathered in her eyes, and first blinded her sight, and then dropped on her sketch-book, and blotted her drawing. Her companion saw it, and gently drew it away from under her hands, to which she passively submitted, hardly knowing what he did, and hoping to quiet her emotion more easily by keeping silence.

“The sunbeam may fade to-night,” whispered he, “but it will come again to-morrow, Miss Duncan ; and we can sleep away the hours of darkness, with the hope of a brighter dawn.”

“I was thinking,” said Hilary, after a pause, and carefully steadying her voice ; “that that oak was like my father, how grand and vener-

able it looks ; and that glowing, golden sunbeam was Maurice's visit to us, just slipping away ; what a bright gleam it shed on us for a little time ; and now it is over, and he will be left—as that tree will be to the night dews, and the cold light of the moon and stars, which may glimmer round him, and seem to make a show and brightness, but have no real warmth, or strength, or power, in their poor feeble beams."

"That is a comparison which does little justice to the bright light which shines on your father's home and household," replied Charles Huyton, warmly.

"I know it, Mr. Huyton," replied Hilary, understanding his words in a different sense from what he intended ; "I know that he has that light within which makes external lights of little consequence. But yet, I cannot help feeling that our home is not what it was once,—and how sad, how desolate it must look to him. If I could but fill the place more effectually—but I am such a child—"

“Maurice says, your only fault is that you are too anxious,” replied Charles Huyton, who found it much easier to praise Hilary than to answer her feelings.

“Ah, Maurice does not know—,” was her only answer.

“You do not in general dispute his judgment,” said Charles, smiling a little. “Do not take your responsibilities so to heart—do not fancy that you are called on to wear yourself out; the very fact of taking things easily yourself, will make them easy to others also. Nobody expects a woman’s grave and severe prudence and consideration, from your youth. Give yourself more liberty, and take less trouble.”

“Did Maurice tell you to say that to me?” enquired Hilary.

“No—I say it of myself; I can see that you are over-anxious.”

“Perhaps I am—but can one really be too anxious to do one’s duty, Mr. Huyton? Do I take uncalled-for tasks on myself—and if not,

if, as I believe, what I do is merely what I ought to do, then, you know, it is what I have the power to do also. More is not required than is possible; ours is not a hard Master;—but then the proper interest must be returned for the talents committed to us, or we are unfaithful as well as unprofitable servants.”

He was silent, for she was talking in an unknown tongue to him, alluding to things as realities, whose existence he hardly recognised.

“I know the fault is mine when I fail; and the merit, if I ever succeed, is His from whom help cometh,” added she, a little hesitatingly, as if in deprecation of his grave looks.

“Maurice has given me leave, as far as he can, to try and fill his place,” said the young man; “and he referred me to you, as to the way in which I could be of use, and when I may come and see you.”

“Will you really?” said Hilary, showing the most innocent pleasure at the prospect; “I

thought when he was gone, you would not care much for coming here as you have done."

"Then you were mistaken. I have known no pleasanter hours than those I have spent at the Vicarage. Besides, how could I get on with my improvements? who would plan my walks, or choose my papers, or design my greenhouses?—no, I am not such an idiot as to throw away a valuable friendship when I have once made it."

Hilary laughed lightly, as her only reply.

"Gwyneth," added he, pulling the child towards him, as he sat on the turf, "you know very well that I could not do without you and Sybil to help me, don't you?"

"We could not get on without you," replied Gwyneth; "Hilary wants to go on learning German, and I am sure nobody could teach her so well; and your French and English books, and your music and paintings are much better, and nicer, and prettier than any we have of our own."

“But then, Gwyneth,” whispered he, “you have things which I have not—much better things, things that I cannot buy.”

“I thought you had money enough to buy everything you wanted,” said Gwyneth.

“Not every thing. I cannot buy a father, or sisters, or a brother like Maurice—and you have all these, which I want; so who is best off?”

Gwyneth looked uncertain, or unwilling to speak.

“Suppose you were to give me back my sketch-book?” said Hilary, stretching out her hand for it; but he drew it back out of her reach, with a look which quieted Hilary, and prevented her saying any more, although she could not easily have told why.

The father and son returned, during the silence which ensued after Hilary’s last speech; and Sybil, who had been very industriously working away at her sketch, now held it up for approbation, which it obtained, as it deserved. The party then prepared to return homewards,

and little Nest, who had been wandering about under the charge of Gwyneth, was recalled, and once more lodged in her pannier.

Mr. Huyton was pressed to come in as usual ; but thinking that on the last evening the family would be more comfortable without a stranger of the party, he declined, and mounting his horse, after very cordial farewells to Maurice, he rode slowly home, meditating on the charms of Hilary, and thinking what he should do with regard to her. To let things take their own course, and be decided hereafter by events, seemed to him the best thing to do.

In the meantime he carried away her sketch-book, with the intention of abstracting and appropriating the unfinished sketch on which her tears had fallen, and giving her a copy, of his own doing, of the scene she had attempted to delineate.

So things did take their course ; and acting on impulse, without any definite idea, or decided plan, Charles Huyton continued to come and

go, between the Ferns and the Vicarage, all through the autumn and ensuing winter. He finished his house, and arranged his grounds, and returned his neighbours' visits, sometimes accepting invitations to dinner, sometimes even appearing at a ball, being exceedingly admired, and very much courted, and making himself universally agreeable when he did go into society ; but withal, preserving a sort of mystery about his usual pursuits and amusements, which rendered him *piquant* and interesting in the highest degree.

He never gave parties of any kind, not even to gentlemen ; did not preserve his game, and did not either hunt or shoot ; men were as much puzzled to account for his oddities, as women. The neighbourhood—that is, the part of the country inhabited by gentlemen's families—lay almost entirely in the opposite direction to Hurstdene, and so far removed from the vicinity of the Vicarage, that the length and frequency

of his visits to the Duncans, passed unheeded and unheard-of.

All his leisure time was spent there, reading, drawing, teaching, gardening for them, and with them, and discussing his own plans and projects. Inspired by Hilary, and advised by her father, he did some very useful things : he built and endowed a school at the edge of his park, for some of the scattered population around ; he improved the dwellings of the poor tenants, and, in short, fell in with all the usual schemes of benevolence patronised by a well-meaning landholder. But the hand that guided him was not at all apparent, and nobody could be more ignorant of her influence than Hilary herself : she really believed that all the right things Mr. Huyton did, came from his own right feelings and good principles. Indeed this was one great secret of her power ; he could see through the designs of the mammas who invited him to their houses, and their daughters who took such interest in his house, his park, his garden, or his

school. He felt that they only cared for him because he was rich, and he believed that had he offered his hand and fortune to any of these elegant young women, it would have been unhesitatingly accepted on the shortest notice, and with the greatest triumph. With Hilary it was different ; kind and obliging as she was, unreserved in many respects, frank and simple, he by no means felt sure that she loved him ; on the contrary, as months rolled on, and the graceful girl grew and developed into a very handsome and elegant woman, whilst her mind matured in proportion as her person improved, he became more dubious on the question which he often asked himself, “ Would she ever consent to become his wife ? ”

His own wishes took a most decisive shape before she had quite completed her eighteenth year ; but his hopes stood on a very different ground : shifting in their appearance, as if they rested on a quicksand, and varying with every interview. That such a notion had never entered her head,

he would have boldly maintained, had it been necessary ; he would have staked his fortune fearlessly on her perfect innocence and simplicity ; he had cautiously guarded against putting it there, by any conduct of his own ; for he had an intuitive conviction that the day his wishes were discovered would be the last of that pleasant, frank, comfortable intercourse, which now existed ; and he by no means felt convinced that it would be replaced by any thing more pleasant.

Every part of her conduct convinced him that she did not love him ; Sybil and Gwyneth could not have appeared more unconscious and unsusceptible of this feeling. But he hoped that time would produce a change—there was no fear of a rival, so he could wait ; and rather than risk all by a premature discovery, he did wait, and watch and guard his looks and manners, and lived in hopes of the future.

He was quite right ; Hilary did not love him. He was very pleasant ; a great comfort

to her father ; most kind to her sisters, and very good-natured to herself ; but for some hidden reason, she never entertained for him the smallest approach to what could be called love ; perhaps it was because she did not think about it : busy and useful, cheerful and yet thoughtful, she had adopted Maurice's notion that she should never marry, but should continue as she now was. To leave her father, or desert her sisters, indeed, would have seemed a monstrous impossibility to her, a thing too much contrary to right, even to be thought of with a negative. Nest, who was but just five years old, would want her care for fifteen years to come at least ; and oh ! what an age that seems, to the girl who has herself only counted eighteen years of life.

But it was very kind and pleasant to have such a friend as Mr. Huyton, to lend them books, and bring them reviews and prints, and help them in the parish with money, and especially to be so fond of Maurice ; write to him so

often, and always show the letters he received from him to them.

And so matters went on, and things took their course, and Hilary worked and read, and governed her household, her sisters, and herself, and very unconsciously, the owner of the Ferns also ; and months passed, and she saw her nineteenth birth-day arrive, and wondered to think how old she felt when she was yet so young, and questioned much with herself whether she had rightly fulfilled her task, and feared that could her step-mother revisit her children, she would find her best efforts had been fearfully imperfect, and that their characters were too much the result of chance and circumstance, and that the guiding hand had been too weak to be efficient.

No—she did not love Charles Huyton ; no thought of him mingled with her reflections on her nineteenth birth-day.

CHAPTER IV.

“ Far, far from each other
Our spirits have grown ;
And what heart knows another ?
Ah ! who knows his own ? ”

ARNOLD.

MR. HUYTON, it may be presumed, did not know that Hilary gave him so small a part in her thoughts, or he probably would not have acted as he did on that very day. However, I will not venture positively to affirm this ; for such are the inconsistencies and contradictions of human nature, that it is safer to calculate on resolutions being broken, and promises forfeited, than on the exact performance of either.

Charles Huyton's resolutions had not been

communicated to others, and his promises were made only to himself, so there was no one who could charge him with inconsistency, or blame him for want of faith, when, after having firmly resolved to conceal his opinions and wishes with regard to Hilary, he betrayed them to her on her nineteenth birth-day.

She was standing in the churchyard, beside the graves of her own mother and her step-mother, recalling her past life, and renewing her resolutions to watch over, guard, and devote herself to her younger sisters ; when Charles Huyton, directed by some extraordinary instinct, discovered and joined her there.

It was a very picturesque little spot. The east window, which was handsome in itself, formed the background ; a beautiful spreading lime, with its pale tassels just then in full blossom, hung over head, and sheltered it from the north ; the graves were carefully preserved, and planted with myrtle, rosemary, and some other evergreens ; and the wall of the church was

richly decorated with large purple and white-flowered clematis, Virginia creeper, and climbing roses. Hilary was sitting on a bench under the lime-tree, plunged in profound meditation, when Mr. Huyton, whose footstep was inaudible on the short turf, presented himself before her.

“You have chosen rather a mournful place of retirement, Miss Duncan,” said he, seating himself by her, after the first greeting; “may I venture to remain with you, or do you court solitude as well as gloom?”

“I do not feel either solitude or gloom in this spot, Mr. Huyton,” said she, quietly; “but it seems to me a wholesome occupation for the mind, sometimes to quit the brightness of life, for the calm repose of such a scene as this.”

He did not answer immediately—he was reading the inscription on the headstones before him; she too was silent. After some minutes, he turned to her.

“I should like to know the thoughts which occupy you so deeply,” said he.

She coloured a little, and replied, “They are sacred to the memory of the departed—but there are so many thoughts which come in such a place as this—I *could* not tell them if I would.”

“The most prominent one then—will you not trust me?”

“I was thinking how false our lives are to our professed principles.”

“In what way?” questioned he, curious to learn the feelings of a girl like Hilary, although not in the least entering into them.

“I was thinking,” replied she, “that all words spoken, and thoughts unuttered too, exist somewhere — are recorded—not passed away into empty air—not perished like the flowers which fall to decay.”

“Well, what then?” said he, not discovering any connection in the ideas.

“How many thousand times have those

words been repeated here, in this church-yard, praying that the number of the elect may shortly be accomplished; and yet how little we realize our own meaning, or live in accordance with the words we use."

"You do not mean to say that we ought to be glad when our friends die?" inquired he.

"Partings for an indefinite time must be always painful, and those left behind to sorrow and struggle, to combat the waves of this troublesome world, must feel desolation and grief; but when we look at a quiet grave like this, where all is so calm and still, and think of the spirit away in some unknown but happy place, we ought not to feel gloom. Gloom might rest on the graves of those who call it 'Ultima Domus'—but for us, who daily repeat our belief in 'the resurrection of the dead,' gloom ought to be banished with despair."

"That is a very beautiful idea," said he, looking with admiration at her elevated expression of countenance.

“ It should be more than an idea ; it should be a guiding principle—I mean that our business here is so to live, that we may think of lying down there without a shudder. Do you know, I have often wondered what I shall feel—with what kind of emotions I shall look down, when they lay *me* there—or rather what once was myself.”

He looked at her with amazement. “ Do you suppose you will be conscious at all?—but do not talk of it ; *I* cannot think of you in such a connection, without more than a shudder. Did you train these creepers so gracefully round the church window ?”

“ Partly ; there have been other hands here besides mine, however ; it has been the work of affection ; the result of the very feelings of which I was speaking.”

“ Which is your favourite ?” inquired Mr. Huyton, determined to change the subject.

“ Of the shrubs ?—that Virginian Creeper, I believe.”

“Why, it has no blossoms, and is not even an evergreen,” replied he.

“I like it the better for that; it says the more to me.”

“What does it say?” replied he, smiling.

“The fading of its leaves speaks of sympathy with us, which I never can fancy evergreens feel. And then they become more beautiful as they decay, glowing with richer colours lent by the frost which is about to strip them; just as those who have silently spent their strength in aspiring heavenward like that plant, often show, when touched by suffering, new and unexpected graces.”

“You are fanciful—but I like to hear your imaginations.”

“The Virginian Creeper has another meaning to me,” pursued Hilary; “it is an emblem of friendship, of which I am very fond.”

“I thought ivy was the emblem of friendship,” observed he.

“Not my emblem—at least, not of the

friendship I mean. Did you ever notice the plants? ivy is a parasite, living on the substance which supports it; drawing its own existence from the life of another; and it is very persevering too, where anything can be gained: it is difficult to check; tear it down, and it will send out new roots and fix itself afresh, until the prop is destroyed by the encroachment of the counterfeit friend; then it is so cold and apathetic, always green and unchanging in appearance, one cannot love an ivy plant, or make a companion of it, however picturesque it may be."

"And your favourite, what character does it bear?"

"Examine it—do you see these little spreading hands with which it supports itself?—see how closely they adhere; if you tear it down, it can never be replaced, however; they will hold, whilst they have life, but forcibly detached, they cannot fix themselves again. They ask nothing in return, but permission to be undisturbed; and

once allowed to attach themselves, they soon cover their sustaining prop with their luxuriant foliage. But the prop must be *real* of its kind, stone, or brick, or wood; but not stucco for stone, nor whitewashed plaster; there they retain no hold; nor polished glass, you see; to that they cannot fix themselves, it is too hard. Is not that constant, true, devoted friendship?"

"And you think then friendship repulsed, or violently severed, can never be replaced?"

"Unkindly severed—no, I should think not; but mine is only theoretical friendship, Mr. Huyton; practically, I have no experience. You, perhaps, know better."

"I believe the only one I ever called a friend, was Maurice, your brother," was his answer.

"I had hoped," said she, looking up ingenuously, "that others of his family might have shared in that title."

"No," replied he earnestly, and gazing at her clear, innocent eyes, "Mr. Duncan is too old.

I respect him greatly, but we are too unequal for friendship, and your sisters, of course, are out of the question."

He paused—her eyes were bent down with a slight shade of disappointment in them: did he not think her worth caring for at all then? well, perhaps this was natural enough. She was startled by his hand being laid on hers, and his voice breaking the silence as he said,—

"And for you, it is not *friendship* that I feel; that is not the name of the sentiment which just now fills my heart."

She looked up again, but her eyes fell under his once more, for she read there something which gave her no pleasure, although it occasioned her surprize. The idea for the first time flashed across her that he loved her, and, quick as thought can go, her mind took in at once all the probable consequences of such a circumstance; the pain and disappointment to him, the interrupted intercourse, the loss to their society, which his absence would occasion, what

Maurice would think, and whether he would wish either one way or the other. The silence was not of more than a minute's duration, but her mind travelled far and fast in the interval. One idea did not occur to her; that was the possibility of marrying Mr. Huyton; she did not raise the question.

His thoughts had not gone so far, they were all concentrated round her, watching the changing colour of her cheeks, and the long eye-lashes which rested on them. He was partly thinking how pretty she was, partly wondering what she was feeling. Of course he had to speak again.

“ Hilary, I love you. Ever since the moment when I suddenly saw you standing alone in the forest, like some unearthly being, like one of those angels of whom you are so fond of talking, you, and you only, have filled my heart. I have lived for you, worked for you, thought of you all day, dreamt of you at night, watched your progress to perfection with an

intenseness of admiration you little guessed ; dwelt on your image when absent, loved your very shadow, doted on you with a heart which never, never loved before.”

“ Hush ! Mr. Huyton,” said she, gravely ; “ these are wild words, not language for one human creature to use to another ; and to *me*, if I did not know you too well, I should think you meant to mock me ; do not talk so ! ”

“ Mock you ! praise cannot come near your merits ; words are too cold ; in that sense they may be unfit to be addressed to you ; as any attempt to paint a rainbow is mockery. But my meaning is most sincere, earnest, true. I love you ! ”

He held her hand in both of his, and looked in her face with all the eloquence of which his very handsome eyes were capable ; but she shook her head.

“ I do not love you, Mr. Huyton—at least, not in that way ; ” ending her sentence abruptly,

and with crimson cheeks, which made him think her mistaken.

“You do not *hate* me?” said he, perseveringly detaining the hand she endeavoured to withdraw ; “tell me, am I disagreeable to you?”

“Hate you! oh no; you are so good and kind to me and mine; and Maurice loves you so, I could not *hate* you; but I am so sorry, so very sorry, that you cannot think of me as I do of you; liking, wishing well to, esteeming one another, being friends and no more.”

“Impossible! a man must be made of marble, who could see you as I have seen you, know you as I have known you, and not do more than like you. Are you sure—but no, I have no right to doubt, to expect, to fancy even, that you returned my passion; but I may hope for the future; perhaps now you know my heart, you will pity me. Let me try to make you love me; give me leave to devote myself to that; if I might look forward to one day making you

my wife ; oh, Hilary, it is for you I have worked at ‘ the Ferns,’ in the dear hope of placing you there, where, surrounded by all that could reward your virtue, and enhance your charms, I might see my idol the centre of worship, the admiration of the neighbourhood—let me hope.”

“ I hardly know what to say to you in answer ; you think of me a great deal too well, but yet I must thank you, and feel grateful to you for your good opinion and your kind wishes, and your love ; and do not blame me, please, for not doing more, or not doing it rightly ; I am very ignorant of what would be considered - right to do or say ; but indeed I only mean to be sincere and true, so if I speak too frankly, you must forgive me.”

“ You cannot speak otherwise than rightly ; like yourself, the very soul of innocence, and modesty, and grace ; be as frank as you please, I promise not to misunderstand you.”

“ Mr. Huyton, I cannot be your wife, or the wife of any one, whilst my father and sisters

require me with them. I believe the conviction of this was so strong in my mind, that I thought you must see it and know it too, and that was why I was so surprised at your talking as you do."

"But, Hilary, 'the Ferns' is not so far off, as to be called leaving them. If you give me no other objection, I need not despair; if your feeling for me would not prevent you giving me your hand, your feelings for them need not surely. I come here every day, so could you; the separation would be merely nominal, and how much more I could and would do for them, as *my* father and *my* sisters, than I could or might do now; what they lost in one way, might be more than compensated in another."

Hilary shook her head, and then, pointing to the grave before her, she said: "I promised her not to desert her children; I have since renewed the promise more than once, on this very spot; and for my father—oh, Mr. Huyton, what

excuse could I have for leaving him ? What selfishness to think of it."

Mr. Huyton bit his lip, and then answered :

" If it is on their account you act, that need not prevent my hoping ; if regard for them prevents your entertaining the thought of leaving them now, this reason will not always exist. In a very few years, Sybil will be able to take your place, and then——"

" But you mistake," said Hilary, drawing back, " if you think they are the *only* reason : I do not wish to give you pain, and I hope you will not think me proud, or anything wrong, but, indeed I must tell you the truth—I do not feel for you what you would like ; I hardly know what to say, but I mean, what you would wish your wife to do. I do not think I should make you happy, or that I could be happy with you, feeling as I do ; and whilst I really am very much obliged to you for your good will to my sisters, and all that you say, I do wish you to leave off thinking of anything more. Find some-

body more suited to be your wife, and the mistress of ‘the Ferns’; somebody who could do you credit, and not a poor, ignorant country girl, like me, quite unused to society, and hardly knowing even how ignorant I am.”

“I might search through all the world, and not meet one more thoroughly good, elegant, refined, and excellent than yourself, Hilary. It is no use to tell me not to hope and wish; it is no use to tell me to love another, after a two years’ acquaintance with you. Only let me try to win you. I do not ask you to bind yourself, *you* shall be quite free and unfettered by promises of any kind; only do not send me away; suffer me in your sight, though I have had the presumption to love you!”

“I thought you would have wished to leave me of yourself, after what has passed,” replied Hilary, in a little surprise.

“You did me injustice then; whilst you are free, and therefore to be won by the man who can best deserve you, I will not leave you, unless

you drive me away ; and you will not do that, will you ? I ask no more ; only allow me to go on as I have done."

Poor Hilary ! she was very young, very innocent, and very ignorant of the selfish pride of a man's nature, or she would not have yielded this point. She had no female friend to guide her, to warn her of the difficulties in which a promise which seemed so fair and simple, might involve her ; or to teach her how far the mere permission to try to win her, might be interpreted in favour of her suitor's claims.

She felt how very disinterested it was of a rich man like Mr. Huyton—clever, fashionable, admired, no doubt, in the world—to ask for the hand of a simple country maiden like herself, whose future fortune bore no proportion to his, and whose family could add nothing to his honour or influence. He might represent the county if he chose ; he had discussed the subject several times with Mr. Duncan ; he might, no doubt, win a wife from any noble family in the land,

and yet he loved her, and asked her to marry him. The wonder of her mind at his making such a choice, so unequal in every respect as her modesty made her think it, was only surpassed by her astonishment at finding that she could not love him in return. Why not? why could not all his good qualities, his ardent affection, and his kindness to her family, influence her to wish to be his wife? Why did the idea seem incompatible with happiness? and why did the notion of reigning at 'the Ferns,' make her cling the closer to her duties and responsibilities at the Vicarage?

Was it the mere idea of leaving those she loved? there was something in that; for she was not blinded by the fallacies of his arguments; she knew the separation would be more than nominal; she knew it must be real, because it ought to be so. Once mistress of 'the Ferns,' in how many new duties and cares should she not be involved, with which her old pursuits at Hurstdene would be incompatible; and once

Mr. Huyton's wife, his claims on her time and society would be paramount, and would he yield them to others? She was convinced he would not. It was true, he was at Hurstdene every day *now*, but then it would be different; and every future plan on which he now dwelt, would call him in an opposite direction.

She did not say to herself in words, or form a distinct idea in her mind, that he was innately selfish and self-willed; but it was this unexpressed thought and feeling, which made her certain that his wife must make him her first and last object, if she would please him, and be at peace.

Hilary could not have told why she mistrusted one who talked so well, and acted so fairly; she had unconsciously explained it by a symbol to him, when she dwelt on the peculiarities of her favourite plant; but she did not know that she was the Virginian Creeper, he the wall, which bore the fair appearance of stone, and was in truth only stucco, and that to one of her nature,

the effort to attach herself to him must be utterly vain.

She really wished she could love him ; I need not say not from any unworthy motives, but from gratitude for his kindness, and his affection for herself ; and although hardly believing that any change was possible, she yet engaged to allow him the opportunity to effect it which he desired. One other mistake she committed, one, likewise, resulting from delicacy and regard to his feelings ; she promised to keep what had passed between them a profound secret, even from her father. She fancied she was doing right ; a dislike to say what might seem to claim her father's thanks, a dread of appearing to boast of her attractions, and the admiration she had inspired, had a little influence ; she felt how unmaidenly it was to triumph in her conquests ; but the chief reason for her silence was regard to Mr. Huyton's feelings, and a fear of mortifying him by making known his disappointment. It was the romantic delicacy of a young mind,

much accustomed to act and decide for itself; used to bear its own burdens in silence; and to endure, rather than to indulge its feelings.

Her theory was right; secrecy in such a case being in general honourable and just; but hers was one of the exceptions which prove a rule, and in her peculiar circumstances it would have been her father's part to decide how their future intercourse should be arranged, as it was his due to know the footing on which they now stood.

Mr. Huyton was well aware of the advantage which he gained, when he won from Hilary's gratitude and delicacy the promise that nothing should be said to others of this conversation. Conscious how unfair this requisition was, he quitted her immediately she had given it, with many a word of gratitude, passionate affection, and intense admiration, and many an assurance of the changeless nature of the feelings he professed.

His love for her was very strong, as well as

very sincere ; he fully appreciated her character ; he saw and admired her genuine truth and simplicity, her innocence and modesty, her humility and her loving nature. He had seen a good deal of women of the world, women of fashion, and could value pretty accurately their admiration of him ; he understood his charms in their eyes, and despised them accordingly. He did not believe there was another woman, besides Hilary, who could have been constantly the object of his friendly attentions, and the companion of his pursuits and wishes, as she had been for the last two years, and yet have never understood his motives, or calculated on his probable intentions. He was aware that this was partly owing to her entire ignorance of the manners and habits of men in general, and the circumstance of having been long used to such devoted care and kindness from her brother, as could hardly be exceeded by the attentions of a lover himself. But he saw also that it marked an entire disinterestedness of character, a total absence of sel-

fish ambition, and a devotion to the plain, straight-forward duties of life, which, if her affections could but be turned into the channel he desired, would certainly secure his happiness.

He was not angry with her for refusing him ; in his calmer moments he would have himself predicted such a result to any explanation between them : he had spoken on the impulse of the moment, and could not be surprised at the answer he received. He loved her the better, as well as admired her the more ; emotion had given a more lovely hue to her face ; and this proof of her purity of principles had added a brighter charm to her mental qualities. He was more thoroughly captivated than ever, and rode home, dreaming of Hilary the whole way ; of the time when he could transport his beautiful flower, now blooming so fairly in retirement, and place it where all would admire his choice, and wonder at his good fortune, and honour his taste in the selection of a perfect wife. For as to failing eventually in the attempt, there was

not a fear in his mind of that occurring. There was no rival, and no chance of one ; nothing to interfere with his success ; and he could exert all the powers of his mind and imagination to win her, undisturbed by jealous passions, unpleasant observations, or the cold interference of worldly customs and reserve. She had promised all should go on as usual, and his reliance on her word was as unbounded as his love for her.

Scarcely had her lover left her, when Hilary, sinking on her knees beside the grave of her step-mother, and covering her face with her hands, renewed in a low but distinct voice the pledge she had already given, never to leave her sisters so long as they required her care, never to forsake them, unless she could see them under safer and tenderer guardianship than her own ; but to devote her thoughts, her strength, her love, and her life, to their and their father's service. ²

It was no sacrifice which she resolved on ; she was not prompted by any enthusiastic impulse ;

she did not imagine herself acting a heroic part ; she believed that it was simply her duty. The ties knit by Nature, the friends given her by Heaven, the charge imposed on her by God Himself, these must surely have the first claim ; and till she had discharged these faithfully, she felt she had no right to form others, or to engage in new and uncalled-for duties. Then she raised her head, and with the grateful emotions of a child relieved from danger or trouble by a tender parent, she thanked her Heavenly Father, that he had made her duty so plain and so easy, that she had no counter - wishes to struggle against, no affection to subdue, no opposing feelings to torment and perplex her. She was glad, then, from the bottom of her heart, that she did not love Mr. Huyton, and wondered how she could ever have been tempted to wish it otherwise.

At that moment she felt that to love him was impossible, and that to allow him to hope or expect a change was unjust to him, as well as

untrue to her own convictions; she repented that she had not spoken more clearly, regretted what she had promised, and resolved to take an early occasion to explain decidedly to him, that the sooner he resigned all his views on her hand, and allowed his love to cool into friendship and good-will, the pleasanter it would be for her, the better and happier for himself. She pitied him exceedingly; she thought it was so very generous and noble of him to love her so: she could not be insensible to such a compliment; and he had shewn such forbearance and moderation after her refusal, had been so humble and gentle, so considerate of her feelings, as she fancied, that he deserved to meet with something better than disappointment. She would make no change towards him, she had promised she would not, she would keep his secret, and trust that her calmness and quiet indifference would soon dispel a love which could not live quite unreturned.

But it was much easier for Hilary to promise

to make no difference towards him, than to keep her word, although she fully intended to do so ; it was simply impossible. A conscious shyness took the place of her former open friendliness ; she dreaded being alone with him, carefully avoided sitting near him, dropped her German lessons, gave up her drawing for the indispensable business of making frocks for the school-children, and was uncommonly silent in his company. He saw all this clearly enough, and he saw she could not help it : he did not blame her ; he rather loved her the better for the bashfulness which made her shrink from him. It gave more interest to his pursuit ; he no longer had the certainty of unchecked intercourse, but there was more excitement, more difficulty, and therefore more amusement as well as novelty. Sometimes he spent a whole afternoon at the Vicarage, without winning from her one open, straightforward smile ; or obtaining even five minutes' conversation unrestrained by her sisters' presence.

Any eyes less dim than her father's had lately

become, or more awake than her young sisters, must have noticed the very great change in their mutual manners ; the absolute and unreserved devotion on his part, the shrinking timidity and constraint on hers. Poor Hilary ! she would have been very glad had her father noticed these circumstances ; she wanted some one to counsel her, to teach her how to escape from the embarrassment in which she found herself ; but she could not break her word, and her father saw nothing of what was passing.

However, things came to a crisis at last. Mr. Huyton took it into his head to add cloaks and bonnets to the set of new frocks which Hilary was getting ready for her little scholars. Of course he had a right to do so if he pleased, and Miss Duncan could not have objected, had he not taken pains to let her know that it was done for her sake, and to please her. What could she do ? he had mentioned it to her father, had received his cordial approval, and his ready promise that Hilary should co-operate, and assist

his ignorance. She sat by in silence, until appealed to by Mr. Huyton, who suggested that she should take on herself all the active and responsible part of the distribution. Hilary felt that to do so would be giving a tacit encouragement to his wishes, such as she could not conscientiously bestow. If he had only *not* hinted that he did it for her, it would have been possible ; but after that, she could not accept the office.

She replied, gravely, that she would furnish the necessary details, but that she thought Mr. Huyton's housekeeper would probably be far better able than herself to superintend the purchasing and making up of the articles of her master's bounty.

"I do not think so at all, Miss Duncan," replied he, smiling quietly ; " my housekeeper, I am afraid, is a vast deal too fine a lady to enter into such schemes with the right spirit : it requires a certain degree of refined tact, the offspring only of a really elegant and generous

mind, to do these things without hurting the feelings of those who receive the benefit. Mrs. Gainsborough, I feel sure, would put on a condescending and self-satisfied air, which would affront all the mothers, frighten the little girls, and probably bring on a quarrel with the school-mistress herself."

"Why do you keep so uncompromising a character then?" demanded Mr. Duncan; "a bachelor like you, ought to have some one who can give away either cloaks or anything else, without fatal consequences to the recipients."

"I have been wishing to change for some time," replied Charles Huyton; "I know exactly the character which would suit me; can estimate to a nicety the advantages of truth, simplicity, steadiness, and gentleness, combined with benevolence, charity, humility, and a universal desire of making others happy."

Mr. Duncan laughed.

"Content yourself with those characters in a

wife, Charles," said he ; " do not expect romantic perfection in a housekeeper ; lower your estimate, or you will go unsuited."

" I shall remain as I am, till I do find them ; but indeed it is only under one circumstance that I intend to change at all ; the housekeeper I seek, my dear sir, will, as you suggest, be also my wife ; till then, Mrs. Gainsborough may rule supreme."

" Except over cloaks and school-girls, it appears," replied Mr. Duncan ; " and those Hilary is to undertake instead."

" If Miss Duncan will do me that favour," replied he ; " but not if you do not like," he added in a lower voice, coming close to the table where she was working.

" Then I advise you, Hilary, to make your calculations of yards and quarters," said Mr. Duncan, rising as he spoke, and preparing to leave the room. " I am going to ride into the town to-day, and could order patterns sent out

for you and Mr. Huyton to inspect and settle on, if you please."

He went out as he spoke, and Hilary was left alone with her lover.

CHAPTER V.

“For she was passing weary of his love.”

ISEULT OF BRITTANY.

HILARY looked up from her needle-work with a trembling heart, but a face of calm determination. She had made up her mind to speak.

“Mr. Huyton, this will not do ; this must not be.”

“What, dear Miss Duncan ?” sitting down close beside her as he spoke.

“I cannot allow this ; you must not suppose that if my father knew what has passed, he would act as he does now. He would see as plainly as I do, the impropriety of my undertaking what is done avowedly for such motives.”

“Impropriety ! nay, you must not put it so

strongly ; surely there is nothing improper in my assisting to clothe the same children as you do ; or even in my caring for them, because they are objects of interest to you !”

“ That is not what I mean ; and indeed, I am sure you will not press your request, when I tell you, that after the motive you assigned, it would be unpleasant to me to grant it.”

“ I would not do what is unpleasant to you, not for the hundredth part of a minute ; no, not if it were to procure me the greatest pleasure in the world. Say no more about these foolish cloaks, I entreat you.”

“ And tell my father the reason ?” said Hilary, blushing very deeply.

“ That is not necessary, surely,” replied he, gravely ; “ there is no occasion to assign any other reason ; make the business over to your school-mistress ; I dare say she will be competent enough. But remember the *motive* is the same ; I cannot pretend to retract that ; and whether you accept of it as a proof of devotion

to you or not, there is no other plea to put it on."

Hilary was silent, and looked down.

"You did not suppose I *could* change?" continued he; "you are unjust alike to my constancy and your perfections. That indeed is the cause of my constancy; there is no merit in loving you unchangeably—nobody could help it."

"Mr. Huyton, I believe I was wrong," replied Hilary, with very crimson cheeks, and a rather unsteady voice; "when I promised to allow you to remain—to go on the same as ever—I cannot—it is painful, embarrassing, most distressing to me. Am I asking too much in asking you to leave us, for a time?—perhaps, too, absence might be good for you, might teach you how much you over-rate me; but, at least, it would do *me* good. After a time, I might learn to meet you unembarrassed, and look on you as I used to do: I cannot now; I have tried in vain—your presence distresses, frightens me—makes me uncomfortable and unhappy."

Hilary ended her sentence in very great trepidation, and finally burst into tears, which both frightened and perplexed Mr. Huyton.

“Dear Miss Duncan, don’t; dearest, sweetest Hilary, my beloved!—do not make yourself unhappy; I will not stay another day to distress you. Though to leave you is exile and banishment, and protracted pain, I will go; only don’t cry. I would not cause you a tear if I could help it. I will make any sacrifice—there now, dry your eyes, take this glass of water! are you better? trust me, your happiness is dearer than my own. I will do any thing you ask.”

Hilary dried her eyes, and quieted herself with an effort; then looking up, she said, “I beg your pardon for being so foolish; but—did I understand you rightly?—you said you would leave us!”

“I did, and I will.”

“Thank you. You will tell my father, will you not?”

“I will explain all that is necessary. Compose yourself, and trust me.”

She rose hastily, and left the room ; dropping, as she did so, a carnation she had worn in her bosom, of which he took possession with a lover's enthusiasm. He did not, however, go away immediately ; he could not, without saying good bye to her ; but he sat down, and formed his plan for the future.

When Mr. Duncan returned, Hilary entered the room along with him, and glanced, with some confusion, at Charles, who, on catching her eye, said, half turning to the clergyman, “I propose to go with you, Mr. Duncan, and give these very important orders myself. I imagine my genius will be equal to that, if the shopman will only help me out a little ; so if you will accept my society, I will order my horse round with yours, sir.”

The offer of his company was readily accepted, and Hilary saw the two depart together, with much satisfaction, for more reasons than

one ; and having watched them off, and sighed to witness how uncertain her father's step had become, she turned again into the house, to attend to household duties.

Mr. Duncan's eyesight had lately been failing rapidly, and Hilary, who was aware of the circumstance, had become extremely unwilling to allow him to ride about alone ; but it was not in her power to accompany him that day, as the girls were all poorly with bad colds, and she did not like to leave them. She was therefore as glad on her father's account that he should have a companion, as she was herself to get rid of Mr. Huyton's society.

She went to her sisters, and read or talked to them, to amuse and comfort them under the unpleasantness of their present indisposition ; and she continued with them until the sound of horses' hoofs warned her that her father had returned.

Charles Huyton was still with him, consequently Hilary went into the drawing-room to

await his entrance, instead of running out into the porch. The two gentlemen entered together: the young man looking apologetically at Miss Duncan, as if to excuse his return.

“ I made Charles come in and give an account of his purchases in the woollen-drapery line,” observed Mr. Duncan, “ that there might be no mistake in so important a transaction, Hilary; when you have arranged about quantities and other necessaries, he says he will turn the matter of making, over to the village sempstress.”

Hilary made no answer, busying herself with the tea equipage, which was on the table.

“ How are the children ? ” enquired Charles, drawing near her ; and then adding, as the vicar went out of the room, “ Do not be displeased with me for coming once more.”

She coloured, and answered, “ I am very much obliged for your going with my father, Mr. Huyton, and also for the arrangements you have made about this business. The little

ones are much the same, thank you, but they will be better to-morrow, I hope. Do you stay to tea this evening?"

"May I?—I should like—I have made up my mind during my ride; I will go abroad to-morrow; but I have not told your father, and it may seem unkind to leave abruptly, without any explanation. But I will do exactly as you please."

"I have made tea for you," replied Hilary, busying herself as she spoke, in putting water into the tea-pot, and thereby avoiding looking up.

Whilst they three were sitting together round the tea-table, Charles Huyton said, rather to the surprise of Mr. Duncan,

"Do you know, sir, I am thinking of going abroad."

"Abroad!" exclaimed the vicar, with an expression of sorrow in his countenance; "I had hoped, Charles, you were going to settle here for life."

“So did I, at one time,” replied Charles ; “but circumstances have interfered, and I am proposing a visit to my mother’s family at Dresden ; they have asked me several times during the last two years, and now I mean to go.”

“When ? soon ? not directly, I hope ?” said Mr. Duncan, still looking much concerned.

“Yes, immediately ; when a disagreeable thing has to be done, the sooner it is commenced the better. Unless Miss Duncan will give me leave to call to-morrow to say farewell to her sisters, I shall perform that painful ceremony to you both to-night.” He fixed his eyes on Hilary with a look of meaning, which she had great difficulty in *not* seeing.

“Come to-morrow, by all means,” replied Mr. Duncan. “Hilary, dear, the girls will be able to see him then, and they would break their hearts at missing him altogether. Are you going with any permanent views of settling in life, Charles ? Excuse my curiosity, but do you

mean to bring home a bride with you? Or, perhaps, you will marry and stay there."

"Most decidedly not," exclaimed he, eagerly and warmly; "there is not the smallest prospect of either one or the other. All my affections are centered in England, all my hopes of happiness are founded on a residence at 'the Ferns,' and every prospective plan of fancy, or retrospective glance of happy memory, will carry me at once to the parish of Hurstdene. You will see me here again as soon as it is in my power to come."

"I shall never see you here again, Charles," replied the vicar, with a gentle shake of his head, and a very patient smile.

"My dear sir, do not imagine such a thing; I trust to be with you at least in the spring."

"I trust you will, my dear Charles; but do you not understand what I mean? Before that time my old eyes will be quite worn out; at the rate in which they have lately failed me, they will be totally dark before spring comes,

and I shall not see your face, though you may look on mine when you return."

"I am shocked to hear you say so," exclaimed Charles, with a face of the deepest sympathy. His glance went from the father to the daughter; Hilary was very pale, and her brimming eyes and quivering lips warned him not to speak to her at that moment; he turned again to the vicar. "But can nothing be done, dear sir? have you had advice? *must* this sad fate befall you? Do not believe it inevitable till it is proved to be so."

"I do not imagine any advice can avail," replied the vicar, calmly; "I have looked forward for some time to this event; and having enjoyed my eyesight for sixty years, Charles, I have no reason to think it a very grievous hardship if I spend a few more in darkness. It will not last for ever—light will come, I humbly trust, at length; a better, purer, brighter light than that on which my old eyes are so fast closing; the Light of everlasting Day.

There will be no darkness in Heaven, Charles ; and thinking of that, shall I complain ?”

With a suppressed sob, Hilary started from the table, and ran out of the room.

“ She is crying, is she not, Charles ?” enquired the father, a little moved ; “ I cannot see that dear face now as I used to do, to read all her emotions as in a book. Poor girl ! she has not learnt to think of it yet, with composure ; but she will find strength in her time of need. I mind it more, when I think of being a burden on the girls, than for any other reason ; but *His* will be done,—I will be as little troublesome as I can.”

“ Troublesome—a burden !” exclaimed Charles Huyton, extremely affected at the quiet resignation of the old man. “ You know *that* is impossible. A burden and a trouble implies something unwillingly carried ; and Hilary, angel that she is, would bear anything for you, or for others, with pleasure. With such a daughter, your domestic happiness can never be entirely

destroyed ; I could almost envy you the blindness which will be waited on, and alleviated by her kindness."

"I am just going to take measures for inquiring for a curate. I cannot trust my sight much longer, and some help I must have very soon," said Mr. Duncan.

Charles Huyton started. A curate settled at Hurstdene, and he away ! images of a painful nature crossed his mind. He foresaw how much Hilary would be thrown with this curate ; he knew the influence which religious enthusiasm exercises over the minds of women ; he foresaw what he supposed would be the inevitable consequence—an attachment between them ; the final overthrow of his hopes. Should this be ! what could he do to remedy or prevent it ?

"I suppose you would wish for a *married* curate," suggested he, after a pause. "A lady resident in the village, would be a comfort, perhaps, to Miss Duncan ; it would be better in every respect to have the gentleman married."

“If we could lodge him ; but how can that be done ? Stair’s farm would accommodate a single man, but there is no house in the village where a couple could live.”

“True, perhaps ; but I think, if you will give me time to arrange, it could be managed. You remember that cottage on the green, which is known as Primrose-Bank, about a quarter of a mile beyond the church. Would not that do ?”

“My dear Charles, are you dreaming ? it is quite out of repair, and small besides.”

“But that is easily altered ; it is mine now ; the lease fell in last Lady Day, and the tenants are gone. I must have it repaired, as you say, and a little addition, a couple of hundred pounds laid out on it, would make it just the thing.”

“What a spirit you have, Charles ; you never see difficulties.”

“Not where there are none ; but, my dear Mr. Duncan, I have a motive ; it was only last

week I heard from a sort of cousin of mine, saying, he wanted a curacy to marry on; and this would be the very thing. I do not know the lady, but I am sure you would like him; and as he is very well off, only wanting work, not pay, until a certain family living falls vacant, I am convinced it would suit exactly. I will put off my departure, until the whole matter is arranged to your liking."

"Can you do that?"

"My departure does not depend on myself, Mr. Duncan; but on one, who, for your sake, would, I am sure, endure me in her presence a little longer. I only wish to please one, for whom I would go or stay, work, beg, die if needs were—your angel-daughter, Hilary!"

"Hilary!" exclaimed Mr. Duncan; "I do not understand! what has your going, to do with her?"

"Dear Mr. Duncan, I love Hilary with a devotion which is beyond any words of mine to express; but she does not love me; and to

please her, to prove my constancy, to relieve her from my society, to try if my absence will win a regard which my presence has failed to do, I have resolved to quit England for a time."

Still Mr. Duncan was puzzled ; the idea of Charles wishing to marry Hilary, was entirely new to him ; and he trembled at the notion of losing her, even whilst he wished he could see her, as he supposed, so safely settled.

Charles explained all that had passed between them, dwelling much on Hilary's determination never to leave her father, with a sort of hope, that his influence would be used to turn her wishes in favour of her lover. His eloquence was interrupted by the return of Miss Duncan, calm and composed, as usual ; and on her resuming her seat, her father immediately entered on the discussion of Mr. Huyton's plan respecting his cousin, and the house at Primrose Bank, anxiously appealing to her for an opinion.

Hilary, who had been for some time aware that an assistant in the parish was every day becom-

ing more necessary, and who saw at once the possible advantage of having that assistant a married man, admitted that the plan was a good one, and did not frown when Charles, with some anxiety and doubt, proposed delaying his departure from England for the purpose of superintending the necessary alterations. It was unpleasant to her, but she could not allow her own wishes or fancies to interfere with the advantage of others, or her father's comfort. To have this affair settled, was of great importance to him, as he had more than once hinted at the necessity of leaving the Vicarage for his successor, and retiring to some other home ; but Hilary knew well that to leave the abode where he had spent nearly thirty years, to break off all the ties formed in a life-time, to quit his people, his church, his schools, and all the interests accumulated around him, would be as painful to his mind and heart, as unknown rooms and paths, and people, would assuredly be trying to his bodily infirmities.

She could not refuse her acquiescence to these plans, although it increased her obligations to one, from whom she was forced still to withhold the only return he asked for his kindness.

After a good deal of discussion, Charles decided that he would go the next morning to London, seek an interview with his cousin, Mr. Paine, and, if possible, bring him down to "the Ferns;" he further determined to engage some clever architect, who could give them the best plan for arranging Primrose Bank, and then the alterations could commence without the least delay; and having come to this determination, he took leave, and returned to his house, to think what more he could do, to win Hilary's heart.

Left together, the father and daughter sat some time in silence; he broke it by saying,

"Hilary, my child, is it for my sake only that you will not listen to Charles Huyton's love?"

Hilary started, laid down her work, and going

to him, she hid her face on the back of his chair, whilst she whispered—

“Dearest papa, I would not listen to any one’s love, who proposed to take me away from you!”

“I could ill spare you just now; but yet, if it would make you happy, my child, I would give you to him,” replied he, drawing down her face and kissing her.

“But it would *not*—it would make me miserable; I do not love Mr. Huyton well enough to marry him. To go and live with him would be wretchedness, and I am very, very happy, with you and my sisters—as happy as I can be!”

“I do not feel sure of that; I shall regret my blindness more than I ought, if it interferes with such a prospect for you.”

“Don’t say so, dear, dearest father; ah! how glad I am that I am not in any danger of being tempted away. Would I leave you in solitary darkness for any thing this world can offer; or, would I throw such a burden on my younger

sisters, as to expect them to take the duties I deserted. I hope *nothing* would tempt me to such selfish wickedness. But, indeed, papa, I do *not* love Mr. Huyton in the least; I cannot tell why, but the more I tried the less I found I could; so now I have given up trying, and mean to devote myself to one dearer, better, more precious than he, or twenty such;" kissing him over and over again, as she spoke.

"Dear Hilary, I will not say a word to urge you to wed where you do not love; but be quite sure, before you decide for life. I should like to see you safely housed at 'the Ferns,' with such a guardian and husband as Charles Huyton."

"You never will, papa—do not talk of it; I will not leave you; I never mean to marry. I have made up my mind to be your single daughter for life, and to give away my sisters, as if I were an old maiden-aunt, or a lady-abbess at least."

He smiled, and passed his hand over her forehead, putting back her hair, and looking lovingly

at her face ; then he added, in a sort of regretful tone,

“ Charles Huyton loves you very much, Hilary.”

“ I believe he does now, papa ; but I daresay it will not last ; you do not think a man could go on loving a woman who did not care for him, do you ? He will find some one else to marry ; and when I am an old woman of thirty-five, he will be thankful that he has so much more charming a wife.”

“ You do not do yourself or him justice, my dear ; I expect he will be constant !”

“ Constant, for a man, dear papa ; but that is not constant to one woman, only to one idea—that of marrying somebody.”

“ What do you know of men, Hilary ?” inquired her father, laughingly.

“ A little from history and books ; a little otherwise,” said Hilary, smiling also.

However, Hilary coaxed her father into not minding her refusal of Charles Huyton, and not

regretting her resolution of never quitting him ; and the matter was dropped between them, although it could not be forgotten by either.

About four days after this conversation, as Hilary and her father were walking together in the garden, where the other girls, now quite recovered, were also amusing themselves, the sound of horses' feet upon the green drew their attention, and looking up, they saw Mr. Huyton advancing to the Vicarage, accompanied by three gentlemen who were strangers. He sprang off his horse, and came hastily into the garden, leaving his companions to occupy themselves by surveying the village.

After a hurried greeting, though a joyous one enough from all but Hilary, Charles told Mr. Duncan, not without some little embarrassment, that he had brought his cousin, Mr. Paine, to visit him ; that one of his other companions was a Mr. Jeffries, a clever architect, who was to give them plans for improving Primrose Bank, and the other was a friend of his own, whose name

he, for some reason, omitted just then to mention.

Mr. Duncan most courteously desired he would introduce any friends he wished ; and the three gentlemen, leaving their horses to the groom, were ushered into the garden. Hilary had no difficulty in deciding which of the three strangers was the clergyman, during the short interval of their approach down the garden walk, and she as rapidly made up her mind that she liked his looks ; his countenance conveyed the impression of benevolence, sense, and firmness : she hoped he would come to settle among them.

He, as might naturally be expected, gave his attention to the vicar, and they soon were deeply engaged in conversation. Mr. Jeffries, the architect, began talking to little Nest, to whom he speedily made himself very agreeable ; Charles Huyton stood by Hilary in silence, whilst she made an effort to converse with the third stranger, a very clever, intelligent-looking man, who answered her remarks with a quick but pleasant manner,

although with a slightly foreign accent, whilst his eyes followed Mr. Duncan's movements, and expressed great interest in him.

After a while, the whole party adjourned to see the church ; Hilary then claiming her right of leading her father, Mr. Paine still by his side conversing on parish matters, the architect leading little Nest, and devoting himself to her prattle with astonishing pleasure, whilst the other two gentlemen followed behind, earnestly discussing some topic in under-tones.

Love of his profession, apparently, overcame his love of children in Mr. Jeffries, when in the church, for he examined the building minutely ; but Hilary observed that the unknown placed himself beside Mr. Duncan, and seemed far more interested in watching his expression and countenance, than in looking at windows, or deciphering brasses.

Her curiosity was excited ; something more than curiosity indeed, for whatever was connected with her father interested her deeply, and she

determined, as soon as she was outside the church, to inquire of Mr. Huyton who this stranger was.

Meantime, the quick eyes and keen perception of Mr. Jeffries had revealed a circumstance which country churchwardens had not detected, and which Mr. Duncan's increasing blindness had prevented him from seeing. The chancel was exceedingly out of repair, and Mr. Paine suggested that immediate application should be made to the lay-impropriator, to remedy that evil now first pointed out. Mr. Duncan promised to take measures to that effect, and they all left the church together.

Charles came up to Hilary's side as they did so, and rather detaining her behind the others, said, "Your eyes, Miss Duncan, have been questioning, ever since we arrived, who the individual now walking with your father is; he is an eminent French physician, a friend of mine, an oculist I should rather say, whom I persuaded to come over here with me to-day, think-

ing that perhaps his advice might be of service to Mr. Duncan."

Hilary coloured deeply ; she saw, or thought she saw at once, that this was another obligation under which Mr. Huyton had laid them ; possibly he had only invited M. de la Récaille to ' the Ferns ' in order to see and consult about her father's sight. It was a positive pain to her to receive favours in their present relative situation ; and whilst she felt she ought to be obliged for the kindness of the thought, she could not entirely suppress a feeling of repulsion towards one who would heap benefits on her, which she would rather have avoided.

" Do you think Mr. Duncan would mind my friend looking at his eyes ?" continued Charles, watching her countenance attentively ; " I was afraid of doing anything disagreeable, so did not like to mention it to him without your leave ; but M. de la Récaille is such an enthusiast in his profession, that he declares I cannot oblige him more than by bringing new cases under his

notice; that is the reason he accompanied me here to-day !”

This speech in some measure relieved Hilary's mind; and after scolding herself in secret for being such a goose as to think that Mr. Huyton must be influenced by thoughts of her in all he did, she entered upon the subject more readily with him, and it was agreed that the suggestion should be made to Mr. Duncan.

“ I am not afraid of hurting him,” continued Hilary; “ for his resignation to whatever happens, is too deep to be shaken by an observation, a hope, or a decision of any man. I have not learnt to view it so calmly yet,” her lip quivering as she spoke, “ and can hardly discuss the subject—but oh ! if your friend could give us hopes—could tell us how to avert—” her voice was lost entirely, and Charles almost regretted that he had introduced the topic. However she recovered her composure again when M. de la Récaille spoke to her on the subject, enquiring particularly, methodically, and with great acute-

ness, all the symptoms of which she had ever been aware in her father's case ; what advice he had taken, and what remedies had been used. His quick, business-like questions, the manner in which he caught the meaning and point of her answers, stopping her from entering on useless details, and arranging all the facts which he elicited during his searching interrogatory, compelled her to use her utmost endeavours to meet his inquiries, to banish feeling and agitation, and to look only at facts in the same light as that in which he viewed them.

It was too late in the day, when they returned from the church, to be favourable for an examination at that time ; and it was finally settled that the gentlemen should proceed at once to Primrose Bank, conclude their investigations there, and return to Hurstdene the next morning ; when Mr. Paine and the vicar could mutually make known their decisions concerning the curacy, and M. de la Récaille might carry

out his wishes with regard to Mr. Duncan's eyesight.

It was an evening of great trial to Hilary ; hope for her father had entered her heart, and she could not bid its gentle whispers be still : but she dared not impart her fancies, or allow him to see how much she dwelt on the idea. He was as calm as ever ; the notion of approaching darkness had become familiar to him, and he was so firmly convinced of the incurable nature of his complaint, that he would hardly have been disturbed, had all the oculists in the kingdom promised him sight. She would not distress him with her agitation ; her feelings must be smothered under an assumed appearance of calmness, but she could not approach the topic ; and whilst her sisters were chattering gaily about the gentlemen whom they had seen that day, and describing again and again the personal appearance of all three strangers, never agreeing in details, nor feeling sure whether any pair of eyes were blue, black, or brown, Hilary

smiled, and answered, and gave her opinion with almost her ordinary cheerfulness and readiness, whilst her heart was palpitating with excitement, and her mind at every leisure moment putting up secret petitions for patience, strength, and submission, whatever the result might be.

The morrow came, and the visitors arrived punctually. After a brief interview between the clergymen in Mr. Duncan's study, he repaired to the drawing-room, and seating himself according to the oculist's directions, quietly submitted to his examination. His daughter stood beside him, her hand clasping his, her breath almost stopped from agitation, her very lips white with intense excitement, and yet her face calm, rigid, and pale as marble. Oh ! the suspense of that moment : her eyes, eagerly bent on the oculist's countenance, endeavoured to read his decision in his face, before his lips pronounced it ; and, unconscious of all beside, her whole mind and understanding was centred on that one object.

Charles was close to her, his eyes intently gazing on her, but she knew it not : had he been a hundred miles off, she could hardly have been more indifferent about him.

It was over at last ; that prolonged agony was ended ; M. de la Récaille shook his head, sighed, and announced there was no hope, no human probability of any cure : perfect rest might delay the result, agitation might expedite the evil ; but come it must ; total blindness, sooner or later, was inevitably impending.

Mr. Duncan heard it unmoved ; he only drew Hilary's hand closer to his heart, and said, in a cheerful voice—

“ Then, my child, I must submit to be dependent on you for eyes ; thank God, that I have still a daughter ! ”

She pressed his hand, words would not come, and she was too shy to caress him before strangers ; but Charles saw that her feelings were wrought to the uttermost, that composure was on the point of giving way, and only anxious to

release her, addressed Mr. Duncan, so as to call off his attention. Hilary had sufficient fortitude quietly to withdraw her hand, and then escaping from the room, rushed into her father's study, where, throwing herself on a chair, and burying her face in her hands, she gave way to sobs deep and agonizing, such as are the out-pourings of suppressed feeling alone, the quivering of the spring long held in suspense.

She was not aware that Mr. Paine had continued in the study after her father left it; at the moment of her entrance, he was sitting in a large chair, engrossed in reading, but startled from his occupation by her appearance, and the excessive agony she betrayed, he looked at her for a minute in silent commiseration, and then rising, and approaching close to her, he said, in a peculiarly gentle and sweet voice—

“Miss Duncan, I am grieved to see you so much distressed: has any thing occurred?”

She started at the sound of his voice, but her feelings were too strongly moved for ceremony,

and the soft, kind tone went to her heart, like the words of a friend.

“Oh, my father! my father!” she sobbed, “all hope is gone, he is, he must be—” then her voice was choked again, in an agony of tears.

“M. de la Récaille gives no hope, then?” said he, very gently; “I am indeed grieved.”

“Ah, if it had been to me,” exclaimed Hilary, “I think I could have borne it better; but for my father, dear, dear father, that he should be helpless, dependent, dark, he who has such intense pleasure in beauty, who has been so active, so busy all his life, that he should be reduced to the state—oh, for submission, resignation, faith, like his!”

“Is he much disappointed at the result?” inquired Mr. Paine.

“No, oh no, he never hoped at all; and he is so good, so trustful!”

“Dear Miss Duncan,” said Mr. Paine, drawing a chair close beside hers, “short as our ac-

quaintance has been, it is impossible for me not to be interested in your father and family ; and the future connection between us, the claim which I hope to have as your pastor, when I come to assist Mr. Duncan in his duties here, makes me feel that I have a right to speak to you. Will you let me address you as a friend, or shall I be intruding unpleasantly on a sorrow I would gladly assuage or mitigate ?”

Hilary raised her head, and wiping away her tears, she said, with a sort of watery smile,

“ Be our friend, Mr. Paine, and speak ; I deserve reproof for my rebellion to the will of heaven !”

“ I would rather give you comfort than reproof, Miss Duncan ; and painful as the certainty you have just acquired must be, natural as grief is under such feelings, I think there is comfort to be found even here. The entire and beautiful resignation of your father, shows so clearly that he has that blessed light within which is alone the source of true happiness, that I think you

may repose in perfect confidence on this dispensation proving a blessing, not a scourge to him. 'HE that formed the eye, shall not HE see' the sorrow or the suffering of His servant? and cannot that Arm guard him from evil during the rest of his life which has led him hitherto? HE has not left him helpless, for He has given him daughters, who, I am sure, will all make it their privilege to minister to his wants. There is the same home to shelter him, the same daily comforts to which he has been used, the same church, and the same loved services to cheer him. And best of all, beyond all," added Mr. Paine, looking upwards, "the same hope of everlasting life in the brightness of light, when our poor, feeble bodies shall be changed into the likeness of the Glorious Body of our Adorable Redeemer, and when all sorrow, sighing, and darkness shall for ever flee away."

Hilary could not answer, and he was silent, too, for a few minutes. Such thoughts as these make earthly trials and earthly pleasures seem

small and poor indeed ; and the young man just entering on life's serious duties and engagements, felt he could readily have changed his own bright prospects, for the fate of the elder christian, whose active warfare must be nearly accomplished, and who must now retire from harassing duties to that quiet contemplation so suited to the last stages of our pilgrimage here.

Recollecting himself and his companion, who was sitting before him, with downcast eyes, and composed, though pale features, he added, in a more cheerful voice—

“And indeed, my dear Miss Duncan, if you have had any experience amongst blind people, you must know that there is far less trouble to the sufferer than to those who care for and watch over him. There are many alleviations mercifully sent in all trials ; and I have often remarked, that those deprived of sight are cheerful, and even joyous under their affliction. To you, and to your sisters, the anxiety and responsibility

may be great, but I feel convinced that, in such a cause, no labour will be a trouble."

"Trouble!" repeated Hilary, clasping her hands; "Mr. Paine, I can only consider it, as far as I am concerned, a privilege, a blessing, to be allowed to minister to such a father as mine. It is a thing to be thankful for, for life."

"Fear not then, you will not be deserted, or left without strength to fulfil your labour of love; services so rendered are indeed a blessing; and happy as I believe your father to be, in having a daughter from whom he may receive attentions, I hold that daughter happier still, who, from the truest, highest, holiest motives, can give her undivided affection to such an object. Miss Duncan, if you can view your position in the true light, you are not an object of pity; the line of your duty is so plainly marked out, you can have no hesitation in following it. Give yourself to it unreservedly, and your strength will not fail: or, if your cares should become too heavy, and your burden more than you can

bear alone, then only believe, and help will be sent you in your need. Look above for aid, and you will find it come to you by earthly means, as you require it. Look below, fasten your hopes on temporal things, and they will wither in your grasp !”

“True, most true ; at this moment I feel it true ; just now, when, weak and fainting, you have been sent to strengthen me, Mr. Paine ; thank you for your words. No, I am not to be pitied, indeed ; for I can put my trust above, and even below I have blessings innumerable. You are right ; my duty is plain, and with GOD’S help I will not depart from it.”

“I hope we shall always continue to be friends, Miss Duncan,” added the clergyman ; “looking forward as I do to a residence amongst you, I feel happy in the prospect of having such neighbours ; and I trust to bring one among you, who, I am sure, will be desirous to be numbered also amongst your friends ; one whose society will, I hope, be not disagreeable to you.

I will not venture to say more, for perhaps you may not consider my evidence conclusive, but I hope we *shall* be friends."

"I am sure I shall be most happy to have a friend," replied Hilary, simply. "I have never had one of near my own age, and I shall look forward to the prospect of the acquaintance with very great pleasure. Now shall we go back to my father? perhaps he will want me; and," added she, with something between a sigh and a smile, "do not betray how weak I have been, and then my dear father need not know it."

CHAPTER VI.

“ But in the world, I learnt, what there
Thou too wilt surely one day prove—
That will, that energy, though rare,
Are yet far, far less rare than love.”

ARNOLD.

“ I CANNOT leave England, and quit for an indefinite time the spot which contains all that is dearest on earth to me, without one more attempt to avert the necessity of separation from you ; one more endeavour to soften an indifference which occasions me so intense a regret. Dearest Miss Duncan, I fear, in my efforts for your father’s benefit, I have increased your sorrow, have deepened and aggravated the wounds, from which your loving

heart was already so acutely aching. Forgive me the deed for the intention; may I suggest that, however bitter was the pang of disappointment, it must be less severe than would hereafter be the misery of self-reproach, had you neglected any means which might have alleviated his affliction? Your pale face of suffering, self-command, and fortitude is ever before me; I longed intensely yesterday to speak words of sympathy and affection; my heart was yearning to pour out its passionate pity for your agony—but I might not—I whose love for you is, oh so deep! so pure, so strong! I was forced to be silent, or to breathe only calm sentences of courteous regard, and polite, well-bred, decorous compassion. Do not be angry with me for putting on paper the feeling I cannot hope to express otherwise; condescend to read and give some attention to what I say. Must I leave you now, with this sad destiny closing darkly round you! leave you to struggle alone, to toil

beyond your strength to sacrifice yourself in the melancholy fate that awaits you ! Do you think I can contemplate such a conclusion with calmness ? Oh ! no, it is agony to me to dwell upon the idea, which haunts me night and day. Beloved, excellent, adorable Hilary, you have an angel's spirit, in an angel-form, but your strength, alas ! is mortal, and well I know that rest and comfort for yourself will be your last thought, whilst your services of love are poured out on the helpless ones around you. May I tell you what is my dream, my vision of bliss ?—I fancy I see you all transported to 'the Ferns,' your younger sisters making joyous with their bright presence the dreary walls of the old house, and causing its empty chambers to echo to their merry voices ; there I see them in idea, growing up under every advantage which can be procured by love and wealth united ; proper attendants, masters, literature, enjoyments in doors and out, every

taste developed, every talent cultivated to the utmost. I see your dear parent, too, enjoying under the same roof every blessing and comfort which perfect filial love and unbounded power could shower on him—every compensation for this new affliction which could assist to lighten the burden, and brighten the remainder of his path through life. And there I see, reigning supreme over all, with all the despotic power of love, and gentleness, and tender firmness combined, one whose presence is like a ray of sunshine, blessing and gladdening every thing within reach. I think I see you, ruling the family, governing the parish, protecting the weak, comforting the unhappy, delighting the gay; influencing all around by the imperceptible power of goodness, even as a delicate odour spreads itself unseen and yet all-pervading, driving away what is bad, and purifying the surrounding atmosphere. Do you frown upon my dream? alas! that there should be that in *me*, which

prevents its realisation ; that though to me it looks so fair and beautiful, my presence should cast the shadow on it, which alone makes it impossible. But is it so ? let me ask, is there no change ? may I have no hope ? Have the three months which have elapsed since I first ventured to express my feelings, passed, and left no trace behind ? am I as far off as ever from the point, the only thing which can make me happy ? If so, I go to exile and solitary misery to-morrow, for solitary I must ever be where you are not ; solitary I shall continue until the weary months roll by, which you may consider necessary. But, tell me how long must it be ? how long must my home duties be laid aside, my house be left untenanted, and myself a wanderer in foreign lands, away from all who have any claim on me ? Hilary, you shall dictate, but remember you decide for more than yourself ; look at the whole circumstances, and then tell me how long shall I be justified in absenting myself from what you have taught me to consider duties

and responsibilities? Deign to give me an answer to this question. Must my dream continue nothing but an empty dream whilst I go, and for how long—or may I remain and realise it?

“CHARLES HUYTON.”

Such was the letter which, on the ensuing day after the interview with the oculist, Charles Huyton's groom carried to the Vicarage; and to this Hilary was forced to reply, for the servant was waiting for an answer. Was it not a dazzling vision to place before a young girl's eyes, whose self-devotion to her family was her most prominent characteristic? Opulence and all its advantages for them, instead of a narrowing income, a humble home, and the wearing routine of close domestic economy; and the price was to give her hand to an amiable and agreeable man, passionately devoted to her, and a favourite with every member of her family. Ought selfish feelings to

stand in the way, and prevent their enjoying benefits which she might so easily purchase?

For a moment she hesitated; she deliberated; not for herself, but for those most dear to her. Then, too, there was his plea. Could it be necessary to insist on his leaving home and home-duties, renouncing his occupations and pursuits, and all for her? Had she any right to require such a sacrifice? She pondered the question again and again: her head was bewildered, and she could decide on nothing. Time was flying quickly; the answer must be written. Oh! for a friend to guide and counsel her.

Nay, but she had a friend; One who would not leave her; One always accessible, always loving and patient. And there was a rule too, a rule to guide her, if she could but discover it; she knew that she must not expect sudden illuminations, divine impulses to direct her; such were not the answers to her prayers for which she had been taught to look. Her

line of duty was marked out, and she should see it, doubtless, clear and distinct, if she could but remove the intervening mists and shadows, which passion and prejudice, imaginations, mistrust, or too great anxiety for the future had thrown across it. She prayed to be guided aright, and then quietly set herself to review the case, trusting that she should eventually see what the right was.

The cloud passed from her eyes; she saw the snare laid before her; stepped aside, and thanked God that she had been saved from sin and danger.

“Thou shalt not do evil that good may come of it.”

There was the rule; and plausible as the temptation had appeared, she saw now that it was *evil*. Yes, *evil* to give her hand without her heart, to sell herself for any earthly good, either to herself or others; to make the solemn vow to love, honour, and obey, one towards whom the two former seemed im-

possible, and the latter might be incompatible with other duties. What, if she shrank from the claims now existing on her, should she therefore form others more indissoluble, more exacting still? If she had not strength to act a daughter's part, should she take the responsibilities of a wife also? Would she have more time to attend to her father's wants, when she had added the cares of an extensive establishment, and a large dependent neighbourhood? What madness to dream of such a change! And would the luxuries, the indulgences of wealth be a real blessing, a safe acquisition to those for whom she had been tempted to procure them. Whose words then were those who spake,—“How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven?” Did not He know, or could He be mistaken?

She wept! not that she must resign the prospect, but that it should have proved a temptation to her; and seizing a sheet of paper,

she hastily wrote the answer which should decide this point as she hoped for ever.

“ Again, and I trust for the last time, let me say, I thank you for your good wishes, but my plans, my intentions are unchanged. I deeply regret having been the cause of so much disappointment to you. Our duties henceforth must keep a separate path. Mine is too clear to be mistaken ; nor am I making any sacrifice in my resolution ; my wishes, my hopes of peace and happiness all point to remaining as I am, as clearly as my sense of right, and my convictions of duty. Now will you allow me, as the only return I can make for your attachment and kind wishes, to say one word to you about what *your* duty is ? Is it right for you to throw on me the decision of what it should be ? you know, whatever you may say, you cannot really make me responsible for what I cannot help.

“ Must you renounce your country and your home, because you must renounce my society ?

I asked you *not* to come to the Vicarage ; I did not bid you go to Dresden—neither do I tell you *not* to go there. If your mother's family have claims on you, of course you must attend to them ; if the claims of others are pre-eminent, should you not give them their due place ?

“ Does it become any of us, poor, short-sighted, weak individuals to quarrel with our station in life, and because Providence denies us one thing we wish for, should we fret like a pettish child, and throw aside every other blessing in angry disgust ? Pardon me for writing thus to you ; I should not have presumed to do so, but for the part of your letter in which you call on me to decide. Mr. Huyton, when you have hereafter to answer for your conduct, will it be a good plea that you gave up the helm of your mind to another hand, one which could not guide you rightly ?

“ Now, farewell. I trust that we shall each be led right in our separate ways, and if I

can give you nothing else, I will, at least, give you my poor prayers for a blessing on you, in return for the kind wishes you have expressed for my family, and the favours you have conferred on them.

“ H. D.”

This answer dispatched, of its results she knew nothing, except that Charles Huyton left the country with the intention of going abroad ; and this information was conveyed by a servant, who brought over a little parcel, directed to Miss Sybil Duncan. There was the key of his library, and an order to his gardener to admit Mr. Duncan's family, when and where they pleased, in his grounds, a privilege accorded to no one else. Hilary was glad of this little proof of kindness, it shewed that he did not resent her answer ; and she trusted that she was acting from right motives, whatever his course might be.

She was the only one of her family who did

not either secretly or openly regret his absence ; but to her the relief was unspeakable, and she knew that her father owned it was right, however much he might miss his society.

Charles Huyton gone, she was able to devote herself to other cares and occupations, and all disagreeable memories connected with him vanished gradually from her mind, in the more pressing duties which surrounded her, and unexpected pleasures which opened upon her view.

Mr. Barham, the gentleman whose duty it was to keep the chancel in repair, answered the letter from the Vicar on the subject, by a visit in person, accompanied by his steward, Mr. Edwards, and a surveyor, whose opinion was much relied on by his employer. Mr. Duncan's infirmities rendered Hilary's presence necessary during the interview ; and the gentlemen really seemed much struck by the young lady's personal appearance, graceful manners, and quick, yet clear powers of mind.

Mr. Edwards paid her several compliments on her business-like habits and capacities ; the surveyor admired her command over her pencil, and Mr. Barham, who was a courteous but calm-mannered person, and who was known generally as possessing a considerable degree of that pride of family and exclusiveness of habits, which often develops itself in a lofty graciousness to all others supposed to be inferiors, intimated his wish to come again, and see how the building went on, and requested permission to bring over his daughters to visit a place which had so much to recommend it.

Hilary gave a ready acquiescence ; and an early day next week was fixed on for a party from Drewhurst Abbey, to come over and take luncheon at the Vicarage.

In the course of conversation, Mr. Duncan mentioned the circumstance of the expected arrival of the curate, who was to come down in a very short time, and take the duty on Sunday. Mr. Barham immediately began regretting that

he had not known that Mr. Duncan was inquiring for a curate: there was a young man of good family and great talent, whom he should have been glad to have seen settled there—one, in fact, who was about to marry a connection of his, a cousin of his daughters—it would have been pleasant to have had them in the neighbourhood: Miss Duncan would have found the lady an acquisition to their society. He very much lamented that the arrangement had been made without his knowledge.

Mr. Duncan was privately a little amused at his visitor, who having been contented for thirty years to have no intercourse with him, could hardly have reasonably expected to be consulted on the choice of an assistant in duties with which he had no concern.

However, he answered very mildly, “that the gentleman in question was, he believed, an excellent young man, which, so far as parochial matters were concerned, was of far more consequence than either high family or astonishing

talents, and he hoped no one would find reason to complain that their Vicar had been hasty or injudicious in the selection of a pastor."

"No doubt that is very true, my dear sir," blandly observed Mr. Barham; "virtue in a clergyman undoubtedly ranks above all; nevertheless the advantages of a cultivated genius and high family are not to be despised; and although there may be many men of low birth highly estimable in a moral point of view, yet it is desirable, for the sake of the character and standing of the clerical body, that there should be gentlemen also in the profession. They give a tone—an elevated tone to the whole!"

Mr. Duncan did not feel called on to reply; and after a pause, Mr. Barham added,—

"I could have wished that your curate had been a man of good connections, and a certain fortune and position in society. Is he married?"

"Not yet, I understand," replied the Vicar; "but he has promised to bring a wife as soon as his new house is ready. And I believe I

may venture to answer for his connections and fortune being both good. He is a relative of Mr. Huyton of 'the Ferns,' who assured me he was a man of independent income."

"Mr. Huyton of 'the Ferns,'—how strange ! what may his name be ?"

"Paine—the Reverend Edward Paine."

"My dear sir, this is most extraordinary ! he is the very man I was thinking of. I am delighted to hear it ; but it is strange that it should be settled without my knowing it ; neither Mr. Huyton nor Miss Maxwell has informed us. I wonder she did not let her cousins, my daughters, know. I wonder Charles Huyton has not called to inform me."

"Mr. Huyton went abroad last week," observed Mr. Duncan, quietly.

"Abroad !—are you certain ? I knew nothing about that, and I should have expected, from the sort of terms we were on, that he would have told me. I can hardly believe it."

Mr. Duncan made no observation.

“I shall call at ‘the Ferns’ to inquire, as I go home. Perhaps you have been misinformed!” continued Mr. Barham.

“I have reason to think not,” was the Vicar’s quiet observation, conveying, however, no conviction to the mind of his visitor, who only thought he knew nothing about it.

“But about Edward Paine,” continued Mr. Barham: “how came it settled without my hearing, I wonder? Whose arrangement, may I ask, was it?”

“It was so recently settled,” answered Mr. Duncan, “that perhaps there has not been time to let you know; and in that case I regret I have forestalled them in giving information, which would, no doubt, have come more gracefully from the parties in whom you are so much interested. Charles knew my wishes, and introduced his cousin here, and Mr. Paine, once introduced, is a person to make his own way: but almost nothing was said of the lady, so that I was entirely ignorant of her

being a connection of yours. Charles did not even mention her name to us, did he, Hilary ?”

“Excuse me,” said Mr. Barham ; “may I enquire who *Charles* is ?”

“I really beg your pardon, Mr. Barham ; I mean Mr. Huyton ; but for the last two years I have been so completely in the habit of speaking *to* him by his Christian name, I sometimes forget and speak *of* him as such, too.”

“I had no idea,” said Mr. Barham, a little majestically, “that my young friend, Mr. Huyton, was so diffusive in his acquaintances. You were, then, on very intimate terms ?”

“He has always been a kind neighbour to us, and being my principal parishioner, and owning most of the property about, we naturally were much interested in many of the same things. He has been very good to the schools, and, indeed, in many ways ; the poor will miss him this winter, for we can hardly expect him to remember them at Dresden.”

Mr. Barham's notions were quite discomposed by this speech. His amiable intentions of patronising and bringing into notice a family who had hitherto "blushed unseen" in the wilds of Hurstdene, seemed apparently quite thrown away; possibly they were not such entire representatives of modern Robinson Crusoes as he had imagined them. He saw, however, no reason for changing his views with regard to introducing his daughters, and, accordingly, he soon afterwards took leave, with a renewed promise to come at the time talked of.

Isabel and Dora Barham were both younger than Hilary Duncan, but their friends had evidently done what they could to give them some of the advantages of age, or to deprive them as soon as possible of those peculiarities of youth which consist in simplicity, bashfulness, or diffidence. They had been early brought out into the world; early introduced into society; they had been taught to behave, talk, and dress as women, at an age when more fortunate girls

are allowed still to feel themselves children. They were now, at sixteen and seventeen, extremely elegant young women, elegantly educated, elegantly dressed, elegantly mannered, surrounded from childhood by all the refinements and luxuries of life; accustomed to lavish indulgence of their fancies, and an unbounded command of money. Suffering was to them a fable; self-denial a mere myth. Had they not been naturally amiable, they would have been now detestable—but they were not. Isabel was a little proud, a little selfish, a little vain; but she had some very good qualities mixed with these vices, which, in good hands, might have turned out well. Dora had no particular character at all; she was merely a reflection of those she lived with; and as these were chiefly her father and sister, of course she generally fell in with their tastes, adopted their habits, and believed all they told her.

They were delighted with the introduction to Hilary; they both commenced a most enthu-

siastic girlish friendship with her. Isabel's was, perhaps, less sincere than Dora's—she had more of her father's patronising tone ; and never, in the least, suspected how very far the vicar's daughter was really her superior in every essential particular.

Hilary was very simply sincere in her regard for the two girls. She admired them exceedingly, and their kindness, their caressing manners, and very amiable ways, engaged her affection. They soon became intimate, and the Miss Barhams would ride over of a morning, and gliding into the Vicarage drawing-room, would spend the whole afternoon hanging about Hilary, chatting, idling, or pretending to learn from her some of the many elegant fancy works which she had acquired. They were continually trying to wile away Hilary to the Abbey ; but this her home occupations forbade, and only twice, during the autumn and winter following, was she induced to spend an afternoon there, and then her father accompanied her.

The introduction of Mrs. Paine was another remarkable event in Hilary's quiet life, which gave her, perhaps, even more pleasure than the acquisition of her other friends. She was a very pleasing young woman, indeed ; and although a cousin of the late Mrs. Barham, and having a good fortune, she was so earnest in her wishes to follow out her duty, so simple in her tastes, and indifferent to personal accommodation, that long before Primrose Bank was habitable, she was established with her husband in tiny lodgings at Stairs farm, and giving her time and attention as much to their new parish as to her future home.

The winter passed quietly, but far more cheerfully than Hilary could have ventured to hope ; Mr. Duncan enjoyed Mr. Paine's society, and relied on his judgment in all parochial matters ; he also liked the two young ladies who frequented his house, especially Dora, who, he once told Hilary, might be made anything, either good or bad, as circumstances fell out.

Sybil and Gwyneth, meanwhile, were growing very tall ; and whether it was from the intercourse with the young ladies from the Abbey, or their own nature, they had lately advanced so rapidly, that their appearance had got the start of their years, and no one would have guessed them to be less than sixteen and seventeen, instead of what was actually their respective ages.

The owner of 'the Ferns,' although absent in a foreign land, had by no means forgotten either his friends or his tenants. More than one extensive order on his banker was remitted to Mr. Duncan, for the relief of distress, and the encouragement of good conduct ; and several letters were received from him, written to the same person. Hilary could neither quarrel with the act, nor the manner of performing it. Although Mr. Huyton was, of course, aware that she would necessarily be acquainted with the contents of the letters, there was nothing in the words which could in the least offend her ;

they breathed warm interest in his people, affectionate regard for the vicar, and kind remembrances to his family. No one could have suspected from these letters what had passed between them, and it seemed to Hilary's young and trustful imagination, that absence was effecting the desired cure ; she hoped that when their friend returned, as he talked of doing in the spring, it would be to resume a pleasant and rational intercourse, such as it had been eighteen months ago.

One morning, about the first opening of spring, the two young ladies from the Abbey arrived earlier than usual ; so early, indeed, as to break in upon the girls' school hours, which was a point Hilary had long begged them to attend to. She was looking graver than usual, which they attributed to this transgression ; and Dora, putting her arms caressingly round her neck, exclaimed,—

“ Now, Hilary, dear, don't be angry, but give your sisters a holiday, and let us be happy for

once ; do you know we have come to say good-bye for ages."

" Indeed ! are you leaving home ?" said Miss Duncan.

" Yes, we are going to martyrdom," replied Dora.

" We are going to town for the season," said Isabel, in answer to Hilary's look of inquiry. " We always do, of course ; it is expected of people in our rank, you know ; Dora pretends she does not like it, but she does really ; and if she did not, one must make some sacrifices for duty."

" Going to London for the season—that means going to be very gay, does it not ?" said Sybil.

" Oh yes, Sybil," cried Dora, " it means turning night into day, and spending it in hot crowds, for whom one does not care the least portion of an atom ; and employing all one's energies, faculties, and time in dressing, dancing, or sleeping—oh dear !"

“Don’t be foolish, Dora ; nobody likes company, or pretty clothes, better than you,” said Isabel.

“That is the worst of it ; I like them against my conscience, and every time I buy some extravagant ornament, I suffer from remorse ; and yet am just as weak at the next temptation. I wish I could say I really hated it all. Do you know, Hilary, I envy you for staying here so quietly in the country, and being able to dress plainly and do good, whilst I am only able to wish to do either.”

“I am afraid you would feel rather awkward, Dora, either with my wardrobe or my occupations. Our duties are so different ; yours, you know, is to go with your father to London, to dress elegantly, and look pretty.”

“That is just what I despise myself for, Hilary—my perfect uselessness, and life of gaudy show. I never leave you without wishing I were situated like you. Not too grand to be useful,—living in a small house, instead of those

fatiguing large rooms, which tire one to walk across ; having a garden one could love and care for, instead of being merely allowed to look at papa's gardener's plants and shrubs : having to do things for myself, instead of being always waited on ; and oh, above all, having learnt to despise the pomps and vanities of life, instead of all the time loving them in my heart, and feeling them necessary to my comfort."

"She is only talking nonsense, Hilary," interposed Isabel ; "she is seized with these fits of despondency about her own rank in life, every now and then, and fancies we are all wrong, for living according to what is expected of us in society. I am happy to say, however, she acts on principles of common sense, and her democratic theories of equality and universal brotherhood are confined to theory entirely."

"It is not right," said Dora, thoughtfully shaking her head ; "it cannot be right ; but I do not know what is wrong, and when I begin to think, I am involved in a labyrinth

of doubt. To be admired, courted, and caressed, cannot be the right aim of life, and yet I am sure it is mine. Now is not that absolutely contemptible, Hilary, to live for such objects?"

"I rather suspect," replied Hilary, "you mistake your real motives. You know your father likes you to go into society, and is pleased when you are admired; and this, I have no doubt, is what makes you like it too. If nobody wished you to go out, I dare say you would be as quietly domestic as I am, Dora."

"I do not know; I believe if anybody I cared for wished me to stay at home, I should yield to them with delight. One comfort is, I know the London dissipation will make me ill, and then I shall be forced to be quiet."

"That is an odd sort of comfort, Dora," said Hilary, smiling; "one I cannot wish for you!"

"It is her nonsense," observed Isabel.

“ Indeed, it is not. I was quite knocked up last year; and I am not so strong now. I mean when I am ill, to ask Mrs. Paine to take me, for change of air, to Primrose Bank, and try how I like small rooms, and a moderate establishment.”

“ Here come Mr. and Mrs. Paine,” observed Gwyneth, who was sitting by a window; “ you can settle with her at once, Dora; it would be so nice to have you at Primrose Bank.”

Mr. Paine went to Mr. Duncan’s study, his wife came to the drawing-room, bringing with her little Nest, who had been saying her lessons to her papa. There were some parish matters to be discussed first, with Hilary; and then, before Dora had time to mention her plans for her expected illness, Mrs. Paine observed, looking earnestly at Hilary:

“ What is the matter, dear?—have you had bad news of any kind to-day?”

“ Not *bad*; at least, not necessarily so,” re-

plied Miss Duncan ; “ but we heard from abroad to-day.”

“ Your brother ! nothing wrong about him, I hope.”

Hilary’s eyes filled, but she spoke calmly. Maurice had been ill, very ill, of a most dangerous fever ; the danger was over now, they hoped, but, indeed, they believed it had been extreme, and he was not yet well enough to write himself. Their letter had been from his captain, who had most kindly written to his father, to assure him that danger was now over, and that they hoped, by care and attention, to restore this promising young officer to his family and his country ; there was one to the same effect from the surgeon also, who had written at the express desire of Captain Hepburn, to certify his being now in a state of convalescence.

“ It was so kind, so very kind, of Captain Hepburn to write,” pursued Hilary, with emotion ; “ and such a beautiful, feeling letter, speaking, oh, in such terms of Maurice, and so de-

sirous to spare my father's feelings. I knew Maurice liked him very much, and now I do not wonder."

"What a wonderful girl you are, you dear thing!" said Dora, caressing her; "having all this on your mind, and yet teaching and talking, as if nothing had been the matter. How did you see, Fanny? for I never discovered any change in Hilary."

"Perhaps, Dora," said Mrs. Paine, "because you are more accustomed to attend to your own feelings than those of other people."

"Well, I am afraid I am; I want to know how to cure that. But do tell me something more about this brother of yours; how long has he been away? what is he, a captain too? or what?"

"He is only a mate, Dora; but has served long enough to be promoted, only we have no interest. But the best part of Captain Hepburn's letter, Mrs. Paine, is, that he hopes to get him leave to come home for his health, and

then we shall have him here again !” Hilary clasped her hands in a very unusual ecstasy.

“ And what sort of interest does it need to make a young man a lieutenant ?” inquired Dora, again. “ Could papa do it for you ?”

“ Interest at the Admiralty,” replied Mrs. Paine. “ I hardly think Mr. Barham would like to trouble himself about it, because he has a nephew at sea himself.”

“ Oh, yes ! cousin Peter—I cannot bear him, Hilary ; I hope your brother Maurice is not like our cousin Peter.”

“ Absurd, Dora !” ejaculated Isabel ; “ Peter is a very good sort of young man.”

However, Dora’s inquiries were not to be stopped by Isabel’s ejaculations ; and before she took leave of the Vicarage, she had made herself mistress of the rank which Maurice now held, of the time he had served, and the wished-for promotion he deserved to attain.

Maurice’s illness, and his expected return to England, so excited and engrossed the minds of

the family at the Vicarage, that another piece of news, which reached them the same time, was comparatively insignificant; this was the projected return of Charles Huyton.

A letter to Mr. Duncan reached the Vicarage the week after the Barham family left the Abbey, intimating that he was proposing to be at 'the Ferns' in about a fortnight. It was a calm and friendly letter; not one expression or sentiment betrayed any strong emotion, nor was there the smallest allusion to the motive which had taken him abroad. Hilary was much pleased,—and when she had thoughts to spare for him at all, they were of a quiet and satisfactory nature.

CHAPTER VII.

“What lady is this, whose silken attire
Gleams so rich by the light of the fire?
The ringlets on her shoulders lying,
In their flitting lustre vying
With the clasp of burnished gold
Which her heavy robe doth hold.”

TRISTRAM AND ISEULT.

THE Barhams had been in town about a fortnight, when Hilary received a letter from Dora, enclosing another addressed to that young lady; Dora's epistle was written in the following words:—

“DEAREST HILARY,

“You see I have got it done at last; I have coaxed, and prayed and begged, and not in vain.

What would I not give to see your dear, beautiful face at this moment ! I never forgot you, and I made up my mind at once. I said nothing to papa, because I thought my dear old friend the earl (he is my god-father, you know) would do it for me, and I believe he only made me beg, for the fun of the thing. I went down on my knees to him ; we had such a laugh when he brought me the little note inside ; I do not think it gave him any more trouble than just asking. Remember, I should not have begged for anybody but *you* ; and having never even seen your brother's face, my efforts must be acknowledged disinterested. Perhaps you had better not tell *him* ; however, you may do as you please, for I am not ashamed. I am not ill yet, but, on my honour, I am not so well as I should be in the country ; and though I have tried hard to be rational, I rather think I am as extravagant as ever. Tell dear Mr. Duncan, I am so glad for you all, and I only wish I could have asked for a step or two more at the same time. The

pleasure of making you happy is so great, that I think I am best off of the whole party, including your brother. Is that the reason you are so fond of doing good, Hilary? it is much better than jewels or balls; only now the excitement is over, what shall I do? Good bye, you dear darling! Mind, I expect a letter of thanks, of course. Your loving friend,

“DORA M. BARHAM.”

Hilary read through her friend's letter in hopes of meeting with something explanatory of her meaning; failing that, however, she did not stop to puzzle over it, but opening the enclosure, found a little note addressed to the Earl, of whom Dora had been writing, informing him that a lieutenant's commission for Maurice Duncan had that morning been made out, and would be forwarded to the young officer by the next packet.

The delight of the whole family at this very unexpected news was quite as great as Dora

could have anticipated ; it was only a pity that she was not there to witness it.

Of course there was still considerable anxiety about Maurice's health ; and until the next account arrived from abroad, they were in a state of too great and trembling uneasiness, to dwell very much on the prospect of seeing him again ; the uncertainty of the issue checked their anticipations, and it required no small exercise of patience and trust, on Hilary's part, to go through her ordinary duties, at moments when her mind was tempted to wander off to the possible or the probable which might yet be in store for them. Mr. Paine's society was a great comfort to her ; she could talk freely to him and his wife of her fears as well as her hopes ; whilst to her father, owing to the relief she thus obtained, she was able to maintain the same cheerful demeanour as ever, and to speak with far more confidence of her brother's recovery, than she really felt.

Mr. Duncan and his four daughters were all seated one day in the little summer-house at the

end of the terrace walk ; one of the girls was reading aloud, whilst the rest were busy with their needles, when a shadow crossed the window which made them look up, and the next moment Charles Huyton turned the corner of the building, and stood in front of them. Down went Sybil's book and Gwyneth's work in a moment ; whilst Nest, slipping from her father's knee, made no scruple of throwing herself at once into the arms which were extended to take her.

“ It is Mr. Huyton,” said Hilary to her father, in explanation of the sudden cry of joy from her sisters ; and Charles, putting aside the little one, advanced to the vicar, taking at the same time in his own, both the hand which was extended towards him, and that which guided and supported it. Excepting that one tender and prolonged pressure of her slight and trembling fingers, there was nothing in his greeting of Hilary which marked any peculiarity of feeling, and even at that moment he hardly looked at her ; his attention was apparently given entirely

to her father ; his words, his looks, his smiles, half sad, half joyous, were devoted to him. He pressed *his* hand again and again, inquired most affectionately after his health, and then turning to the others, greeted Sybil and Gwyneth with looks of open, undisguised pleasure, remarked on their wonderful growth, and paid some little compliments to their personal appearance, which brought a still richer glow into their cheeks, all the deeper because the admiration was but half expressed in words, and much more unequivocally in looks and smiles. Then sitting down amongst them, he exclaimed at his pleasure in being there once more, glancing from one to the other of the party with happy eyes, taking Nest upon his knee, and bidding Gwyneth sit beside him, almost as if he had been Maurice himself ; and all with such an easy, disengaged air, and so entirely devoid of any appearance of a nature to alarm Hilary, that after the first half hour her heart ceased to flutter, her cheeks to glow with consciousness or fear, and she was soon convers-

ing with him as unreservedly, and almost as readily, as her sisters themselves. He entered into parish matters with Mr. Duncan, and his questions of, How do you like Mr. Paine? and How does he please in the parish? and many others of the same kind, were followed by an appeal to the girls as to how music and painting went on; and then a gentle questioning of Hilary herself as to the favourite scholars, the old women pensioners, the idle and mischievous boys who had formerly vexed her; and sundry other particulars, which proved that whatever else he had consigned to oblivion, he had not forgotten anything connected with the welfare of his tenantry. Discussing the repairs of the church, introduced the name of the Barham family, with whom he was already acquainted, and he seemed pleased to think that they had formed an intimacy with the Duncans, and amused at Sybil's somewhat enthusiastic friendship and admiration for Dora.

The relation of what she had done for

Maurice might have justified this partiality, but Sybil did not know the particulars connected with that transaction ; Hilary being rather shy of owning the influence through which the long-desired promotion had been procured.

“ And oh ! Mr. Huyton, Maurice is a lieutenant,” was therefore the information which Gwyneth communicated, without any connection with Dora Barham’s name.

“ A lieutenant ! I am glad indeed to hear that ! I congratulate you, my dear sir,” was Charles’s exclamation, grasping Mr. Duncan’s hand once more with warmth ; “ nay, I think I may do the same to you all,” added he, taking the two girls’ hands in his, and kissing little Nest very heartily. “ Indeed I do congratulate you all—*you*, Miss Duncan, more especially.”

He dropped her sisters’ hands and advanced towards her, very gracefully, yet with a little hesitation, which bespoke doubt as to whether he were taking too great a liberty.

She could not help placing her hand in the

one he extended, and she looked up with her clear innocent eyes to him, as he stood before her ; there was nothing in his look to alarm her into shyness, and she met his gaze with quiet, comfortable confidence, as she said,

“ Indeed it has been a pleasure, although it, like mortal affairs generally, has had a drawback, for Maurice has been ill.”

“ Indeed ! I am sorry—not seriously I trust !”

Hilary glanced at her father, and then replied, “ We have only had a report from the captain and doctor as yet ; we are expecting further news in a short time. I will show you the letter from Captain Hepburn.”

She drew the letters from her work-basket, and gave them to him with another glance at her father, and a sort of beseeching look at him, as if deprecating any unnecessary alarm to Mr. Duncan. Charles Huyton understood her, and seating himself by her side, he quietly read through the two letters, and returned them ; observing—“ It was this, doubtless, that

prevented his writing to me lately. I should not wonder if we were to see him here, before you hear again. He will, of course, return now."

She felt grateful to him for the cheerful tone in which he spoke, although she saw, by the anxious expression of his eyes, that he participated in her uneasiness on her brother's account.

"And what are your plans now, Charles?" inquired Mr. Duncan kindly, laying his hand on his visitor's shoulder; "have you made up your mind to become a useful member of society, a good and hospitable neighbour, a justice of the peace, or to fill any of the other duties which country gentlemen ought to attend to?"

"I will place myself in your hands, my dear sir," replied he, with a sudden glow over his countenance, which Hilary did not see; "you shall dictate what my duties are. However, I have indeed made up my mind

to renounce my hermit life at 'the Ferns;' and, as a preliminary step, have persuaded an aunt and cousin of mine to come over to England and pay me a visit."

"Indeed! who are they?" inquired Mr. Duncan, with interest.

"Mrs. Fielding was my mother's sister, and, like her, married an Englishman. Will you do me the great favour of visiting them, Miss Duncan?" turning suddenly to Hilary. "I am anxious to give them, my cousin especially, a favourable impression of England."

Hilary replied she would be most happy; a sort of wondering feeling passing through her mind, as to *why* Mr. Huyton was so desirous to please his cousin. Perhaps he hoped to persuade her to settle for life at 'the Ferns,' and then how pleasant it would be to have a friend in his wife; her countenance brightened at the idea: and her manner became more easy and disengaged towards Charles from that moment.

He seemed readily to fall into his old ways, in every respect, except such as she might have objected to, and never thought of leaving them for the rest of the afternoon; taking it as much as a matter of course that he should remain to tea, as the younger girls did.

On their return to the house, whilst Hilary supported and guided her father's steps, he loitered behind with her sisters, strolling along the terrace, and laughing and chatting with them, telling Sybil he had found them out by the sound of her voice reading, which fortunately was not so much altered as her person was, or he should have run away, believing them to be a party of strangers. But when Mr. Duncan was safely past the window, by which he entered his own room, and Hilary had turned away to take the path to the porch, he immediately joined her, and began, in a voice and words of sincerest sympathy, to inquire into the actual

state of her father's sight. She could speak of it calmly at last ; use, and the quiet submission and unvarying cheerfulness of Mr. Duncan, had reconciled her to the idea, and she was able to tell him with composure, or rather resignation, that all was quite dark to him now ; but that she was thankful to say, that the affliction had been so softened and modified, as to be far less terrible than she had imagined it could be.

Then he alluded to Maurice ; but here the chord of feeling vibrated too strongly ; the tension had been too acute for it to harmonise entirely with faith and patience ; and they sounded in a minor key, compared with the sharp tone that fear and suspense rang out.

It was with quivering lips and trembling eye-lids that she spoke of her brother's danger, and it was with looks and tones of answering sympathy that Charles Huyton replied to her. Had not her eyes been at that moment blinded

by her tears, she might have read how deep his feelings were.

“It is very wrong, I know,” added she, dashing away the drops from her eye-lashes ; “I ought to feel more resigned, knowing as I do, he is in the same Hands still, and that nothing will happen but for the best. I still shrink and tremble inwardly as to what may be in store, although I ought to do better, considering the lessons of trust I have had.”

He stepped into the porch, near which they were standing, and taking up a small basket from the bench, presented it to her.

“You told me once,” said he, “that flowers preached to you, and taught you lessons of confidence and hope ; may I trust that these will say something of the sort, and not be rejected ?”

He lifted the lid, and showed her a bunch of lilies of the valley, carefully arranged, with their roots in wet moss.

“Oh ! how exquisite !” she exclaimed, stoop-

ing over them, to hide a little hesitating consciousness, and not venturing to take the basket from his hands ; “ these must be forced, Mr. Huyton ! ”

“ Yes, I found them this morning in my conservatory, and brought them here, thinking you would all like them. Will you not take them ? ”

“ It seems selfish when you have visitors coming to-morrow,” replied Hilary, still looking at them.

“ My aunt and cousin have nothing to do with these ; the gardener raised them on purpose for you and your sisters, I know ; I can claim no merit, except that of willingly bringing them : do take them, and put them in pots in the drawing-room ; and let them speak of comfort.”

“ You have chosen your text well,” replied Hilary, receiving the basket from his hands, and raising first one and then another of the delicate bells. “ They do indeed preach elo-

quently. Thank you very much for so kindly reminding me of all these flowers bid me consider."

He gave her a quiet, rather grave smile ; and then turned the conversation to some other topic, as they walked into the house together.

He seemed very happy afterwards, assisting Gwyneth and Nest in preparing the flower-pots in which these lilies were to be planted, whilst Hilary sat with her father at the window, and gave her advice on the subject, but was not allowed by any of them to tire herself over the plants, as she had taken a long walk that morning, and was looking, they all agreed, both pale and fatigued.

Mr. Huyton did not come to the Vicarage again for two or three days ; he was supposed to be occupied by his visitors, who, they heard from Mr. Paine, had arrived when expected.

To Hilary's great satisfaction, Mrs. Paine

offered to accompany her to ' the Ferns ' to call on these visitors, a task which, for several reasons, was rather a formidable undertaking to her. They drove over together, in Mrs. Paine's little pony-carriage, and were received at the door of the large house with a degree of splendour and pomp such as she had never seen there before.

Hilary thought of her first visit to that place, and the quiet way in which she had then been introduced, as they followed the servants through the spacious vestibules and antechambers, into the morning sitting-room, where Mrs. Fielding and her daughter were sitting. Happily for them, Charles entered as they did, and he introduced Mrs. Paine pointedly as his cousin ; Miss Duncan was more slightly named, but it was evident, by the quick glance which Miss Fielding gave, that her visitor was an object of some interest to her. The elder lady was equally foreign in her look and her accent, both which betrayed her birth, although

perfectly lady-like, and rather pleasing; the cousin, in whom Hilary felt more interest, was a handsome girl, more English than German in her air and voice, and looking so perfectly at home at 'the Ferns,' that Miss Duncan could not get the idea out of her head that she was consciously destined one day to be mistress there.

"Victoria has been wanting you so much, Charles," said Mrs. Fielding, turning to her nephew, who was standing by Mrs. Paine. "It was something about the drawing she was copying; I hope presently you will help her out of her difficulties."

Mr. Huyton said something about happy, and turned to his cousin with a smile; but Hilary, who unconsciously watched the expression of his face, was disappointed: it was not exactly the smile she wished to see there, not like the happy, frank look she had been used so often to receive, before she learnt to know its meaning.

Victoria Fielding threw back a somewhat haughty head, and said, with a flashing, mocking look of her bright eyes,—

“Mamma flatters you! do not fancy I wanted you in the least. I disdain help. My motto is, ‘By my own hand.’”

“Very well,” replied he calmly, but with an expression of admiration in his face; indeed, she was so handsome and graceful, that it was not easy to look at her without admiration.

Her conversation to him was all in the same style, to Hilary she hardly spoke at all; and when Miss Duncan tried to find subjects of conversation, she seemed little inclined to reply, unless Mr. Huyton joined; whatever she might affect of indifference towards him, Hilary was convinced, was simply affectation. The wish to attract him was obvious, although shown in a taunting and defying sort of way.

After about ten minutes’ conversation of this uncomfortable and disjointed kind, Charles suddenly turned to Hilary, and said—

“Have you been into the conservatory lately, Miss Duncan? I should like you to see my camellias.”

Hilary, feeling that any change would be a relief at that moment, answered that she should like it very much indeed; and then he asked Victoria if she would come too.

“No, thank you,” replied the young lady, carelessly, “I have walked round and about it, till I am more weary of that particular spot of ground, and those especial flowers, than of any thing else on earth; except myself,” she added, in a sort of whisper.

He smiled again.

“Conservatories should be made like kaleidoscopes, to vary at every turn, or they grow intolerably dull,” added she, aloud; “don’t you think so, Miss Duncan? Perhaps you don’t know, however; you probably have not been so often in the one in question as I have.”

“Perhaps not,” said Hilary, very quietly; “but I always thought it very pretty when I did see

it. However, it is many months now since I was in it."

"I cannot fancy *you* tiring of flowers," said Charles, with more peculiarity of accent than he had used before; so much so, indeed, as to cause Victoria to raise her head, and turn a sharp look on the person thus addressed.

Mrs. Paine rose at this moment to go, and Hilary, glad to escape from the eyes bent on her, prepared with pleasure to take leave of the whole party. Charles, however, accompanied them out of the room, and then, as they were crossing the vestibule, repeated his request that they would come and look at his camellias; adding, with a quiet, grave courtesy, which he had assumed since his return, "I hope it was by your own choice that it is so long since you have entered the conservatory: for though it was optional with you and your sisters to visit it, it was not left so with the servants whether you should be admitted."

"I am afraid, from your saying that, Mr.

Huyton," replied Hilary, "that Sybil omitted to thank you for your thoughtful kindness. I assure you, my sisters have paid several visits here during the winter, as Mrs. Paine can testify, having accompanied them every time."

"Yes, laying claim to relationship," said Mrs. Paine, smiling, "I ventured on that liberty."

"I am truly glad your sisters enjoyed it," was his answer; he saw at once the reason why Hilary herself had scrupulously avoided similar visits: he did not like her the less.

He cut huge bunches of heliotrope, and the loveliest camellias he could find, "to send to her sisters," as he said. Most gardeners would have been in despair at the liberties he took; but Mr. Huyton was peculiar, and with his gardener, Mr. Allan, the Miss Duncans were great favourites; so perhaps the surveyor to the conservatory did not grumble very much.

"Your library has been a great resource to my father," said Hilary presently, wishing to say something which should show gratitude, and

avoid misconstruction ; “ he has often expressed himself so much obliged to you for your liberality.”

“ Is not that a lovely bud ?” said he, holding up a half-blown camellia, whose delicate white petals were just displaying the fringe which gives them such an air of lightness and refinement. “ How I do love a pure, delicate, unostentatious flower, which seems unconscious of its own charms, and shrinks modestly from sight.”

He placed it in her hand as he spoke ; the only blossom he gave her, the rest he deposited in a basket, to be carried to Hurstdene.

“ I think you love flowers better than ever,” was her observation, very innocently made.

“ I do,” replied he, gravely, with eyes turned away in another direction. “ Take this little peeping red and white bud to Nest with my love, it is the very image of her dear little face. See how coquettishly it half looks out, half hides.” He said this in a light and playful tone, and she made him a smiling answer, and

then Mrs. Paine, having concluded a dialogue she had been holding with Mr. Allen, summoned Hilary to the carriage.

As he helped her in, he said, but without looking up at her—

“Was not I right in saying my cousin has nothing to do with lilies of the valley?”

“She should wear the crown imperial,” said Mrs. Paine, laughingly; and then they drove off, whilst Hilary mused on the feeling he entertained for his cousin, and what she wished that feeling to be, now she had seen the lady.

She looked forward with a little anxiety to this visit being returned. It made her uncomfortable to think of it; there was something in the quick glance of those very bright eyes which discomposed her, and made her feel shy and shrinking. It was not, however, half so bad as she expected, when the visitors really arrived, which they did in the course of a week. Mrs. and Miss Fielding drove over, Mr. Huyton accompanied them on horseback. The ladies

made themselves very pleasant; the mother conversing with Mr. Duncan, evidently and sincerely interested by the courteous manners, mild countenance, and quiet cheerfulness of the blind clergyman; Victoria devoting herself to Hilary with a sweetness, complaisance, and air of satisfaction, which, after her former reception, quite astonished Miss Duncan. She was delighted to meet her young acquaintance again; she was enraptured by the drive, enchanted with the dear, picturesque old parsonage, captivated by the charming antique room, with its old oak wainscotting, and fine rare china vases, bequests from Mr. Duncan's grandmother. She called Nest to her, and kissed and caressed the beautiful child, wanted to draw her portrait, begged to have her to spend the day with her, to all which requests Hilary replied with little more than a smile, considering them too entirely ideal to deserve a serious answer. But in the middle of one of her most complimentary speeches, Victoria was astonished to see Hilary suddenly

start from her seat, stand one moment gazing through the window, with clasped hands and parted lips, and the next spring from the room, and disappear altogether.

Charles Huyton, who had been chatting with the other girls, rose, and looked after her with an expression of anxiety and alarm, then approaching his cousin, asked if anything was the matter with Miss Duncan.

“ You, who know her so well,” replied Victoria, with a peculiar smile, “ ought to be aware if this is her usual manner to her guests. May be, it is the perfection of English politeness !”

But little Nest ran after her sister, and throwing open the door, disclosed to their view, in the vestibule, Hilary clasped in the arms of her brother Maurice. It was a pretty thing to see ; and the sister was too completely absorbed in her joy to be conscious there were spectators, as he bent over her glowing face, and kissed her again and again. The tall and manly figure, the bronzed complexion, and fine countenance

of the sailor, forming a charming contrast to the elegant girl, whose fair cheek rested on his bosom, whilst her eyes spoke the welcome she had not words to say.

Charles, however, cut short the amusement of the spectators, by shutting the door, before the younger sisters had seen what was passing outside the room ; and a few minutes passed in a sort of awkward silence between Victoria and Charles, although Mr. Duncan, ignorant of what had occurred, was comfortably talking to Mrs. Fielding.

All thoughts of the visitors at that moment in the drawing-room had gone from Hilary's head ; she saw only her brother, and was conscious only of thankfulness to see him again, and a pang of sorrow for the one who could not see at all. After the first mute embraces, and then the whispered words of love and joy, Maurice pronounced his father's name, and Hilary, half-angry with herself for having even during that short time engrossed all the delight

of knowing him safe and well, placed her hand in his, and led him into the room.

Then she remembered who was there, and her colour came and went : delight, shyness, pride, and embarrassment, mingling in her feelings as she encountered the eyes within, and recalled how abruptly she had quitted them.

The visitors drew back, and the exclamations of the girls, the movement, the unusual step, and a whisper or two around him, warned Mr. Duncan something had occurred.

“ What is it, Hilary ? ” said he, rising and stretching out his hand ; “ Maurice—my son ! ” as his fingers closed upon those which so warmly grasped his—“ Thank God ! ”

But Maurice could not speak. The sight of his father’s helplessness, the closed eyes, the slow and cautious movement, and the increased appearance of age which the last three years had produced, overcame his fortitude, and the young man had to struggle hard with the emotions of tenderness and

grief before he could control his voice to answer his father's greeting.

"Can we not go?" whispered Mrs. Fielding to Charles; "we are sadly in the way."

Victoria's eyes were fixed on the group, with a thoughtful, longing expression; but she felt the propriety of her mother's proposal, and turned to quit the room.

Hilary recollected herself and them, and advanced to accompany them to the door, whilst Maurice still saw nothing, and no one but those so dear to him.

"I am sorry you should be driven away," said she, gracefully, "though I cannot pretend to be sorry for the cause. He is my only brother."

"Do not apologise, my charming young friend," replied Mrs. Fielding, with her gentle accents, "you must be glad to get rid of us, and I feel we have had a pleasure we do not deserve, in witnessing so captivating a family-

picture. I congratulate you with my whole heart."

"If we have acquired knowledge we have no right to," said Victoria, pausing before stepping into the carriage, and warmly clasping Hilary's hand, "we have paid dear for the acquisition ; at least, *I* have, for I have discovered my own poverty. I could envy you, Miss Duncan ; and of all the charming things I have seen to-day, to love, and be loved like you, appears to me, beyond comparison, the best. What would I give for such a brother !"

She sprang into the carriage, not deigning to accept her cousin's proffered assistance, and turning on Hilary once more her bright eyes, brighter for the tears that filled them, she kissed her hand, and drove off.

"I will not stay now," said Charles, "to intrude on a happiness in which I can well sympathise ; but let me come to-morrow, and welcome Maurice home—tell him how sincerely

I congratulate him ; he is not looking ill, although rather thin. Good-bye !”

He released her hand, which he had held in a long, lingering clasp, gave her one look of indescribable feeling, then mounting his horse, cantered quickly away ; for when he turned to wave his hand to her, ere he had gone two paces, she was out of sight.

Hilary did not pause a moment indeed, to watch his *départure* : she darted into the house, and was again beside her brother, ere Charles had looked round. And then, unrestrained she could enjoy the full delight of seeing him once more. Oh ! the kisses, the congratulations, the smiles, the tears, the silent rapture, and the joyous exclamations of that welcome. It was long before they were rational enough to ask how, or when he arrived in England, or to remember his increase of rank—they thought only of himself ; whilst he could hardly find words to express his wonder and admiration at the change the three years had made in his

sisters. Hilary so improved, and yet so little altered ; the same darling girl, and yet more charming and dear than ever. And the others too ! Sibyl as tall as Hilary ; Gwyneth not much behind ; he could not believe they were the same. Oh ! how glad he was to be here.

“ And about your illness, Maurice ? ” inquired his father.

Then came the history of his fever, how it was increased by over-exertion, how suddenly it had come on, how bad it had been, and how, so far as human agents were concerned, he owed his life to the kindness of his commander.

“ He is such a good fellow, father ; I hope you will know him some day ; I am sure you would like him, Hilary ; he has nursed me like a brother ; he gave me up his cabin ; took care of me day and night ; if it had not been for him, I must have died, I should have been stifled in my berth. How glad I am he is made ; more glad than for my own promotion, which, by the bye, I only heard yesterday at the Admiralty.

Hepburn came home with me, you know : he was promoted from home, and had to return of course ; and as I had leave for my health, we came in the same packet, and he promised to come down and see us here, when he has settled some business in town."

"God bless him !" said Mr. Duncan from his heart ; "if a visit here could give him pleasure, how gladly we will welcome him : you must write to him in my name, Maurice, and repeat the invitation."

The girls were never weary of hearing Maurice talk, and the history of the last two months had to be gone over and over again ; whilst every variation of praise which could be bestowed on Captain Hepburn was poured out by the grateful young lieutenant on his late commander. He was true as steel, brave as a hero of romance, firm as a rock in duty, tender as a girl of others, where feeling only was concerned ; indifferent to his own comfort, careful of his men's, devoted to his profession,

a first-rate sailor, a pattern of an officer, a thorough gentleman in conduct, a true Christian in principle, and to crown all, in the imagination of the girls, he was tall, dark, good-looking, of an old, historic family, and comparatively poor ! This was the climax to the interest in his favour ; for Maurice knew that Captain Hepburn's family had been unfortunate, had lost their property in a lawsuit, and that he had, by much self-denial and economy, succeeded in paying debts left by his father, and honourably discharging every claim, far beyond what law alone required of him.

Allowances must, of course, be made in this bright picture for the favourable prejudices of Maurice's feelings, seeing his senior officer's character through the beautiful vista of his three years of agreeable command, crowned eventually by the extreme personal kindness, which had largely contributed to save the young man's life ; but if the brother, in his strong partiality, over-rated the worth and merits of his

friend, it was not likely that the young sisters would curb their female fancy, and estimate him in their imaginations by a juster scale, or a cooler feeling for his virtues. Captain Hepburn was established as an indisputable hero, in the minds of Sybil and Gwyneth ; and even Hilary gave more of her leisure moments to forming ideal pictures of him, than it was at all her custom to do, with regard to unknown individuals, or circumstances which did not immediately connect themselves with her daily duties.

CHAPTER VIII.

“And women—things that live and move
Min’d by the fever of the soul—
They seek to find in those they love,
Stern strength and promise of control.

“They ask not kindness—gentle ways—
These they themselves have tried and known ;
They ask a soul that never sways
With the blind gusts that shake their own.”

ARNOLD.

CHARLES HUYTON kept his word, and came over in the morning, as he had promised, to see Maurice. There was not much doing in the way of study, or regular employment, that day ; even Hilary was unsettled by her joy, and after two or three vain attempts to promote reading, or engage in their usual occupations,

she had given it up, and the whole family were clustered together round Mr. Duncan's chair on the lawn, who, whilst enjoying the warmth of a spring morning, was also delighted to be surrounded by the happy voices, and caressed by the soft hands which seemed continually flitting about him.

The happiness of her feelings, and her conviction that Victoria Fielding was destined to be Charles's wife, made Hilary more than usually cheerful and disengaged in her manners to the visitor ; and his looks and his words were in general so carefully guarded, that she had nothing to alarm her into coldness or reserve. Frank and friendly to Maurice, as usual, more so, perhaps, even than formerly, he was ; but *he* must have been a very close observer, who could have detected from any thing which passed, that he regarded Hilary with a different feeling from her sisters. The only thing which could have indicated peculiar and strong attachment, indeed, was his extreme warmth and

affection of manner to her father and brother ; and this might also arise from other causes unconnected with her. So Hilary was happy and at ease ; Maurice was with her, and Charles, as she supposed, grown so rational, as to be content to give up a woman who did not love him, and seek one who did, in her place.

Whilst Mr. Huyton was there, Mr. and Mrs. Paine walked in, having just come up from the village school ; that being one of the duties of which they had relieved Hilary, since her father's infirmity had required so much more of her time and attention. When pleasant people know one another well by name and report, they do not take long in becoming acquainted on meeting ; so half an hour had scarcely gone by, before they were all on the most comfortable and easy terms imaginable.

"Only think, Hilary," said Mrs. Paine, "Dora Barham has carried her point, and is coming down here next week ; let me see, this is Wednesday ; yes, she is coming on Monday

next, to stay with me, for change of air. I never thought Mr. Barham would have allowed her to give up the chances of a London season."

"The chances to her, I really believe, would have been a severe fit of illness," replied Hilary. "She is very delicate, and I have no doubt Primrose Bank will be more beneficial to her than Bryanstone Square in every respect."

"Who is going to be your visitor?" inquired Charles of his cousin's wife.

"Oh, Dora Barham, my pretty little cousin; you remember her, I dare say, when you were in England last year. You used to visit at the Abbey, I know."

"I remember your cousins very well," replied he, expressively; "very agreeable women in society. Some of those girls who are reared entirely in a forcing-house, and brought out as fashionable ladies, when they ought to be only children. I used to think her rather idle and weak, but amiable enough if she were only

allowed to be so. With such an education, one must not look for simplicity, or real refinement of mind, but be thankful for unaffected and elegant manners, when one can meet them."

"You are unjust, Mr. Huyton," exclaimed Hilary, with animation ; "Dora Barham is much more than that ; she has most genuine kindness of heart, and sweetness of disposition. No one must say a word against Dora Barham in my hearing, on pain of my intense displeasure. Maurice, I appeal to you—be her champion."

"I am convinced," replied Maurice ; "I have been for some months convinced of her excellence ; ever since she first formed your acquaintance, I have been prejudiced in her favour ; and though I have never seen her, there is no lady in the land to whom I am so perfectly ready to swear allegiance, and devote myself as her champion."

Mrs Paine laughed.

“ Well, you will have the opportunity soon, I believe ; I shall be curious to know whether she will answer your expectations.”

Mr. Huyton looked puzzled at the enthusiasm of Hilary and Maurice ; he was not aware of the cause of this interest. The young lieutenant had learnt his obligation from his sister, and although his pride might have been more gratified had promotion been the unsolicited reward of merit, his feelings were excited and warmed towards the girl, whose love for Hilary had chosen so judicious a way of exhibiting itself.

“ I was charged with a commission from my aunt and cousin,” said Charles, after a while, “ which I hope to execute successfully, or the consequences will be, I cannot venture to say what. Will you all come over and spend to-morrow at ‘ the Ferns ? ’ Excuse the shortness of the invitation ; it is not to be a formal visit, but a friendly one. Pray say yes ! ”

Some excuses were urged by Hilary, but

Mr. Huyton would not accept them. He asked Mr. Duncan first; he appealed to every member of the family; and from each, especially from Nest, obtained a ready assurance that each would like very much to go to 'the Ferns' to spend the day. Hilary could not contend against such an overwhelming majority, and was forced to yield. Charles only urged Victoria's wishes to her—it was her invitation, her earnest desire; she wished to see more of them all; everything should be arranged to suit the hours and the tastes of the various members of the family. There were plenty of amusements for little Nest, and another little girl, a very nice child, had been invited to meet her; the carriage should be sent to fetch them, and should take them back in the evening, and Mrs. Fielding hoped that she should be allowed the pleasure of devoting herself entirely to the entertainment and care of Mr. Duncan, who so strongly reminded her of her own father, now some years deceased, that

she longed to see him again, and see more of him.

To resist such an invitation was impossible ; and Hilary, mentally wondering why Victoria should be so anxious for her acquaintance, and yet gratified at seeing the kindness extended to her whole family, and not confined exclusively to herself, was on the whole much pleased at the idea.

The next morning proved as warm and bright as could have been desired by any of the party ; and twelve had hardly struck from the church clock, when the carriage drove up to the door. Nothing could exceed the warm welcome, and the undisguised pleasure with which they were all received at ‘the Ferns.’ The ladies and Mr. Huyton were loitering on the lawn, in front of the conservatory, and Mrs. Fielding immediately proved her sincerity, by gently taking possession of Mr. Duncan, to whom she devoted herself so unremittingly, that Hilary found nothing to do for him.

The luncheon and children's dinner occupied a considerable time, and after that, whilst Mr. Duncan was driven out round the park in a low garden chair, by his indefatigable companion, and amused by her lively and interesting conversation, the rest of the party adjourned to the bowling green. This, which was most beautifully kept, was surrounded by a double row of limes, whose long bare branches were already showing the bright crimson buds which precede the leaves, whilst they, as yet, afforded but a partial interruption to the sunshine, which in April, in England, is not often too hot.

Charles, Maurice, Gwyneth, and Sybil entered into a spirited game at bowls ; whilst Victoria and Hilary paced up and down on the broad walk under the trees, partly observing the game, partly engrossed in conversation. Miss Fielding seemed particularly interested in the details of her companion's daily life, about which she asked innumerable questions ; she also admired Maurice very much and very

openly, to Hilary, who was as much pleased at this, as she was amused and surprised at her companion's entire ignorance of English habits, and domestic life.

"Yes, I know little enough about my father's country," replied Victoria, "but I want to understand it better ; and I do not think my cousin's house or customs, are at all a rule for real Englishmen ; he is, like myself, half German."

"I do not think he would be a bad specimen," replied Hilary, "let his country be what it may ; he is so very kind and considerate to every one about him."

"Charles ! yes, he is a good sort of person," said Victoria, smiling. "Let's me have quite my own way here ; has given me *carte-blanche* to do as I please ; a liberty I cannot always expect, so I mean to make the most of it, whilst it lasts."

"I dare say it will last," observed Hilary.

"Oh, I don't know ; you English wives are

so very domesticated and subdued ; you seem to me to give up all will and way of your own ; one's own identity is lost in the unity of the marriage state ; one is merged into another's being ; and so becomes nobody, in fact as well as deed."

"Perhaps it may be better, where such is the case," said Hilary ; "but it is not invariable."

"Well, I like to do things well," said Victoria ; "and when I *am* an English wife, I mean to behave as is expected of women of fortune and family. Upon the whole, I do not think it will be bad."

"You are going to marry then ?" said Hilary, a little hesitatingly, yet anxious for the answer.

"I am to be married in the autumn," replied Victoria ; "meantime I intend to enjoy myself, and Charles lets me reign here *en princesse*. He certainly is good nature itself, with regard to me."

“He told me at first, how anxious he was to make England pleasant to you,” observed Hilary, recollecting the wonder she had felt when he had mentioned it to her.

“Now I want to consult you,” continued Victoria, “about some of my plans.—Ha! well bowled, Mr. Duncan; do you see, your brother plays well; I think we will weave a crown for the victor, shall we, or at least give him a sprig of myrtle to stick in his coat as a trophy? Charles, you will be beat entirely. I wonder you do not exert yourself more, for the sake of your partner.”

“I suspect Miss Gwyneth rejoices more in her brother’s prowess than she would in mine,” replied Charles, pausing before he sent off his bowl, which had been driven by Maurice’s last stroke close to the edge where the ladies were standing. “My defeat excites no sympathy, and my victory would raise no exultation, so long as one of the family lost by what I gained.”

He was gravely considering the bowl, which he held in his hand as he spoke, and did not raise his eyes, although Victoria bent hers on him with a most expressive glance, as she answered in her native language; but what was the nature of her observation, Hilary was not sufficiently mistress of German to understand; she only saw that the few words brought a deeper glow to his cheek, and a sort of suppressed smile to the corners of his mouth, both which spoke no ordinary sense of gratification. It was the first time she had observed anything like emotion in his intercourse with his cousin, and she concluded that it was some expression of affection or encouragement which had called up that look of pleasure.

Victoria turned away, and drew her companion on also; resuming the topic which had interested her before this little interruption, namely, a party which she wished to give in her cousin's house. It was to be a sort of fête, uniting a day-light and an evening party, a *déjeuné* in a

marquee on the lawn, and out-of-door amusements for the afternoon—a band of music in the gardens, flowers, fish-ponds, a boat on the lake, and any other diversions they could devise or invent. All the country should be asked, and no expense or trouble spared, to make it delightful.

“But, Miss Fielding, consider the time of year,” exclaimed Hilary; “we are but just at the end of April, and May is often so cold a month with us, that we cannot reckon on fine weather for an out-of-doors party.”

“Stupid climate then; what, not after the twelfth? I thought of the fifteenth, which would be a Wednesday; surely the weather by that time *must* be fine.”

“*May* be,” replied Hilary, laughing; “when you have been a little longer amongst us, you will find there is no *must* for an English climate at any time of year. Sometimes we have snow in May; but by the fifteenth, perhaps, there may be sunshine and green leaves.”

“I shall trust to that, and plan accordingly,” replied Victoria; “there is nothing like hope.—There goes your brother again; how he plays; ah! Charles is completely conquered.”

The girls were tired, and the gentlemen too were willing to rest, so they all went into the conservatory, and seated themselves there; Victoria beginning a very lively conversation with Maurice, who was far too much of a sailor not to be ready to admire any handsome young woman, and quite able to make himself agreeable to her.

On the whole, the visit passed off most pleasantly; they dined rather early, and after coffee, were allowed to return home in sufficiently reasonable time to prevent Nest falling asleep before getting into the carriage. Hilary, whose mind was now quite easy regarding Mr. Huyton, for she never doubted but that Victoria was engaged to him, though she had not mentioned his name, was quite cheerful and happy; no longer afraid of addressing Charles, nor shrinking from his

notice ; and delighted to think that his future wife was so pleasant, and so well disposed towards herself and family.

From this time, there was a great deal of intercourse between the two young ladies, sometimes carried on by notes, which Charles most frequently brought over, but more often by visits from the cousins to their friends at the Vicarage ; for Hilary could not again be tempted to ‘ the Ferns,’ and therefore Victoria, who was always wanting her advice, had to seek her at home.

Often the elder lady accompanied them, and insisted on taking out the clergyman for a drive, whilst the young people settled their concerns together : half the notes of invitation, at least, were written by Hilary’s hand, and plans for ornament or amusement suggested by her head.

The younger girls were wild at the prospect of such an unexpected pleasure ; and as there were to be numbers of children of the party, Nest was included amongst the visitors.

Mr. and Mrs. Paine necessarily often came in

for these conferences, although they did not intend to have any share in the grand fête, Mrs. Paine's health at the time affording her a rational excuse for avoiding excitement and fatigue.

Their domestic party at Primrose Bank was in due time reinforced by the promised visit of Dora Barham, who made her appearance at the Vicarage the next day ; and whatever might have been the state of her health on leaving London, she certainly was glowing enough when introduced to her darling Hilary's tall brother.

The handsome young officer, with the frank gratitude natural to him, made a little advance towards shaking hands with the pretty young woman, to whom he was so essentially obliged ; an advance which would have been instantly checked and cut short by recollections of what cold courtesy required, had she not perceived both the first motion and the subsequent impulse. More anxious to save him from awkward feelings, than scrupulous about etiquette, she gave him

her hand with a charming grace, and a bewitching smile, from the powerful effect of which Maurice did not recover for the rest of the morning at least.

Half an hour afterwards, the party was scattered considerably ; Mr. Duncan and Gwyneth, out driving with Mrs. Fielding ; Maurice, Sybil, and Dora, sauntering along the terrace in the garden ; Mr. and Mrs. Paine, quietly at work in the school ; and Hilary seated between Victoria and Charles, talking over plans, smoothing difficulties, and showing how impossibilities even might be conquered or set aside.

Several days slipped by, much in the same way. Dora was a heedless girl, and more than once left a bracelet or a handkerchief at the Vicarage, which made it indispensable that Maurice should go over to Primrose Bank, to return it, on those mornings when she did not intend to come to the Vicarage ; and this intercourse was carried on to such an extent, that Mrs. Paine became seriously alarmed for the

result. She knew Mr. Barham well, and was perfectly certain that any attachment to a poor lieutenant, on his daughter's part, must be as little to his taste as aloes to a child. To remonstrate with Dora, would infallibly make matters worse, if she had any inclination in his favour; and poor Mrs. Paine most heartily wished that she had never undertaken a charge of so delicate and difficult a nature, as the care of her young cousin.

To her great relief, however, before ten days had passed, Mr. Barham and Isabel came down for a few days to the Abbey, and Dora was summoned home immediately. Maurice regretted it much; but poor Dora, who had permitted her imagination to be most unwisely occupied by the charms of her new acquaintance, felt it a great deal more; and now looked forward to the grand fête at 'the Ferns' as a day of possible felicity, because it would throw her once more into his society. She made some effort to go over to the Vicarage once or twice; but Isabel

seemed backward to do it, observing, that now Hilary had her brother, it made a difference ; and poor Dora, only too conscious that it did make a most important difference, dared not press a proposal of the kind, from this very consciousness. Whether Isabel knew of her frequent interviews with Maurice Duncan, she did not discover, and could not decidedly guess ; the only motive avowed for the visit to the country, was to be present at Mr. Huyton's grand party ; and as several friends accompanied Isabel from London, their abstaining from their former frequent visits at the Vicarage whilst engaged with visitors, appeared too natural to require an excuse.

As I said, Dora felt the separation more acutely than Maurice, partly because he knew his own admiration to be so very presumptuous that he could no more wonder at her being removed from his society, than he could at the setting of the sun or moon ; and partly because he had another engagement, which necessarily engrossed

his time and occupied his thoughts. This was a visit from Captain Hepburn, who came down in answer to the pressing invitations he had received both from Maurice and his father.

His arrival in itself was rather a disappointment to the younger girls ; he came down in so very unheroic a style, as little accorded with their romantic fancies regarding him. In the first place, he did not take them by surprise, but having written to announce his intention, afterwards came just when he had promised, and might have been expected. Then he drove up in a gig, and brought a portmanteau and hat-box ; he wore a black coat, and an ordinary hat, and seemed to have met neither misfortunes nor adventures on his journey.

He certainly was tall and handsome, but he was also quiet and grave, with a complexion so bronzed by weather, and an expression so thoughtful and sedate, as to give him the appearance of six or eight years more than his actual age.

The two girls were awed into silence and fear, and even Hilary felt the regard she had already imbibed for him, deepen into a respect almost too strong to be compatible with ease, and which produced an appearance of timidity and reserve in her manners, not at all usual with her. This, however, was only at first; fear soon wore off with him, for he was as simple as he was quiet in his habits and manners, and as easily pleased as Maurice himself. He arrived in time for their early tea, and Maurice having once mentioned what their hours were, he appeared perfectly ready to conform to them. His friendly regard for Maurice was indisputable, and his pleasant and attentive manners to his father were very conciliatory. To the young ladies he was at first quietly civil, and Hilary learnt to appreciate more correctly the anxious *empressement* and extreme attention once so naturally received from Charles Huyton, when she discovered that politeness alone did not dictate such devotion.

Captain Hepburn had not been twenty-four

hours in the house, before all the young ladies learnt to regard him with composure as well as respect. He was generally rather silent, and much given to reading, in which occupation he spent nearly his whole morning, in appearance so profoundly engrossed by the page before him, as to be unconscious of all else. This quiet habit made it perfectly possible even on the first morning, for the others to occupy themselves as usual; Sybil and Gwyneth read and wrote, worked, drew or practised on the piano, as comfortably as if Captain Hepburn had been a hundred miles off, instead of being seated at a table only three yards from themselves; and Hilary went in and out, and attended to her father's comforts, arranged her housekeeping, worked for Maurice, overlooked her sister's exercises, or taught little Nest her arithmetic, exactly as if there had been no visitor present, or as if he had been there all her life.

When she appeared with her bonnet on, and her youngest sister by her, and half-whispered to

Sybil that she was going down to take something to Mary Clay on the Common, Captain Hepburn roused himself from his studies, much to her surprise, and asked leave to go with her.

Leave was granted, and the trio set out together ; Maurice was reading to his father, so he did not accompany them.

It was a very pleasant walk, after Hilary had conquered the first feeling of shyness which her companion excited. He conversed so pleasantly at first about the forest, and forest scenery in England and abroad, then about Maurice ; and of him he spoke so kindly and cordially, that Hilary took courage to say what she had before been longing to express, their extreme and heartfelt gratitude for his kindness and attention to their brother during his perilous illness. Captain Hepburn would gladly at first have stopped her thanks ; but she would not be stopped, and the earnest eloquence, the trembling tones of deep feeling, the glowing, grateful expressions, were

of a nature to touch the heart of even a cold or selfish man, and on him, who was neither, produced a powerful effect. He looked at her eyes glittering with tears, at the colour varying in her cheeks, at the lips trembling with emotion, and he thought he had never in his life seen so interesting a picture of affection and sensibility.

“ You think a great deal too much of what I did, Miss Duncan,” said he, when she paused ; “ I only wish I deserved your thanks. Maurice is as fine a fellow as ever lived, and one could not do too much for him ; and now I see what his home is, and whose hearts and happiness were wrapped up in his welfare, I am doubly happy to have been of any use. There is no need of repaying me with thanks, it is more compensation than I deserve.”

“ We cannot think so,” replied Hilary, raising her eyes to his face.

“ To see your brother with your father is perfectly beautiful,” continued Captain Hepburn,

well knowing how to return the pleasure which Hilary's thanks had given him.

"Oh yes!" cried she artlessly, "is it not? we are so happy when he is at home."

They walked on in silence for some time, and when he spoke again, it was to make some remark on the advancing spring.

From that time all remains of shyness had vanished from Hilary's manner to their guest, and she became as perfectly at her ease with him as with Maurice himself. The first week of his visit was a very quiet one; their visitors, except the Paines, had deserted them, Mr. Huyton had gone to London, and was not to return until the fourteenth, and Victoria and her mother had other engagements, which occupied them during the same time. This week of repose was very welcome to Hilary, it was a relief after the unusual bustle and occupation which had preceded it; she was able to resume her old domestic habits, and although the party in prospect must sometimes claim a thought, she was

not obliged to give up all her leisure moments to its concerns.

She read, and worked, and walked as in old times, with one important exception, that she had a companion such as she had never had before. There is an affinity between some minds, which is inexplicable and incomprehensible to those who have it not. That week had not passed away, before Hilary had learnt to look with interest, and something more indefinable still, for the opinions of Captain Hepburn, as she gave her own ; a glance told her how well she was understood, even before the words of agreement came, and then she felt she was right. She learnt more, too ; she saw how those dark eyes would fix themselves on her with an expression which sent a strange thrill of pleasure through her heart, even when it brought a bright colour to her cheeks ; she discovered how often when his head was bent over his book, his glance was following her as she moved about the room, and she was neither

annoyed nor frightened at the discovery. It was so pleasant to find that this cultivated and intelligent man, as brave as he was good, and as clever as he was kind, could take such interest in her thoughts, her ways, her wishes. She looked up to him as something so immeasurably her superior, that his approbation seemed an honour ; she felt she could trust him ; that he would be one who would sacrifice all to right, and that no selfish consideration would induce him to forget her interests, or to endeavour to influence her to a questionable act.

There was some strange spell on her surely, which made her confide to him so many of her fancies and feelings ; thoughts which were hard to put into words, but which he understood intuitively, or from a hint, a few hesitating sentences, or even an unfinished phrase. And then when he talked, it was so delightful to hear him, there was such a spirit of kindness, sincerity, uprightness through all he said, that she unconsciously ranked him as the first of human beings,

and his occasional words of half-uttered commendation as the most valuable praise she had ever received. Captain Hepburn in that single week had done what Charles Huyton in two years had failed to accomplish ; he had, unknown to herself, touched Hilary's heart, and won a large share in her affections.

The day preceding the fête at ' the Ferns,' brought Victoria over to the Vicarage to make the final arrangements concerning Hilary and her sisters. Mr. Duncan entirely declining to be present, it had been settled, that Mr. and Mrs. Paine should spend the day with him, whilst his daughters were all absent ; an arrangement which Hilary was more than half inclined to contest, as hardly doing sufficient for his comfort. She and her sisters were to be under the especial care and chaperonage of Mrs. Fielding, who, since she could not persuade the father to come, said she should find some compensation in taking charge of his daughters. Victoria came on Tuesday to propose that the sisters

should be fetched over rather early, that they might be comfortably established before the general assembly appeared ; and also, Miss Fielding said, that Hilary might help her overlook the preparations, and see that all was complete and appropriate.

Whilst she said this, Victoria's eyes were glancing inquiringly at the tall, dark, handsome stranger, who was seated, with a book in his hand, at the other end of the room, but who, she was sure, was listening attentively to her discourse. After a moment's consideration, Hilary asked leave for Maurice to bring a friend with him, and then named Captain Hepburn to Miss Fielding ; but the introduction was not made without a slight blush, which Victoria's keen eyes perceived. She received this new acquaintance with equal grace and graciousness, gave him a cordial invitation to her fête, and was as pleasant as possible for a few minutes ; then she turned again to Hilary, talked of Charles, who was to return that evening ; his anxiety that

all should be right, his confidence in Hilary's taste, and his wishes that it should be consulted, and some other remarks, of a kind which *she* passed by as mere compliments, from the woman who was engaged to Mr. Huyton; but which there was another person, whose ignorance of this fact made him view very differently.

When Victoria was gone, Captain Hepburn rose, and after walking once or twice from the window to the table, he suddenly asked Miss Duncan if she was not intending to exchange her thimble for her bonnet, and take some exercise that afternoon.

Maurice and his father had gone on a long expedition across the forest, the latter on a pony which his son led, and Hilary had intimated an intention of going out to meet them on their return, which Captain Hepburn was evidently anxious she should fulfil. Her sisters were at Primrose Bank, and there was nothing to interrupt the perfection of their *tête-à-tête*, except a

slight and unusual shade of something in Captain Hepburn's eyes, which Hilary had never seen before, and did not quite understand now.

Whatever might be the source of this change, whether displeasure, anxiety, or weariness, it somewhat awed and chilled her; she looked up to him with such reverence, and thought so humbly of herself, that she did not venture to seek an explanation. She fancied that either he was secretly tired of her society, or that she had said or done something which had appeared to him silly or wrong; and she felt ashamed of her imaginary fault, although quite unable to attach any definite name to her misdemeanour. She walked on silently, and so did he by her side; casting every now and then a longing, sorrowful look at her face, which, had she ventured to meet it, would have told her it was neither anger nor contempt then occupying his mind.

At length he spoke.

“That Miss Fielding! what is she to the owner of ‘the Ferns,’ Miss Duncan?”

“Cousin,” replied Hilary; she hesitated whether she should add more, but thought it best not to explain what she believed their relative position to be.

“And this Mr. Huyton, of whom she speaks so much; is he married?” said he, fixing an anxious look on her face as he spoke.

“No, not yet,” said Hilary; almost unconsciously betraying a little of the amusement at the question, which she could not effectually suppress.

“And you know them all very well, I suppose,” was his next observation.

“I have not known Miss Fielding very long, but she is so kind and friendly, that I look forward with pleasure to—” she checked herself with a blush, that she was so nearly owning her expectations.

He saw it, and the momentary glow which

coloured his face, gave way to a deeper shade and a paler hue than before.

“Mr. Huyton we have known nearly three years,” added Hilary, looking up; “I think you will like him, perhaps; and yet I am not sure; there is a great difference between you.”

“Very great,” observed he, with assumed philosophy; “he has recommendations to which I cannot aspire—wealth and station are great advantages; and three years allows time for all good qualities to become apparent; so lengthened a friendship is enough of itself to speak for him.”

Hilary was silent for some minutes, and then raising her eyes timidly, she said—

“There is always a debtor and creditor side in all accompts, Captain Hepburn!”

“True, as a principle; to what do you refer, Miss Duncan?”

“To what you just said,” blushing deeply as she spoke; “I only wished to remind you, that even Mr. Huyton may not have all the advan-

tages of life within his reach ; and there may be grievances to be endured even by him, of which we know nothing.”

“True. I acknowledge we are more ready to reckon our troubles than our blessings,” replied he, in a tone of self-correction. “And as we see the bright parts of our neighbours’ life, and not those which are in shadow, we are apt to forget how much may be concealed.”

“Yes,” replied Hilary, “we gaze at our neighbours as we do at the moon ; and often forget their existence altogether, when they are not lighted by the rays of prosperity. It requires an effort of the reason to realize that our lot in life, like the face of our planet, may seem as bright to their view, as theirs does to us ; we are so intimately aware of the roughnesses and inequalities which surround our feet, and see so little of the light of heaven on our own path.”

He smiled, and answered,

“You are fond of picturesque analogy, Miss Duncan.”

“Distance alone, I think, often prevents our judging with accuracy,” continued Hilary ; “what we take for an ornament, or a support, may be simply a chain or a burden ; and what we fancy a halo of glory, is, perhaps, the torturing fire consuming its victim.”

“You are exerting your fancy, I think, to make me view my lot in life with complacency.”

“No, I was trying to convince you of the injustice of the charge you brought by implication against me just now,” was Hilary’s answer, half-shyly given.

“What charge ?” enquired he, with some eagerness ; “of what could you imagine I could accuse you, to require any justification ?”

“By implying that the difference I alluded to, as apparent between you and Mr. Huyton, must necessarily be a comparison to the disadvantage of either. Or supposing that the possession of property had any influence on my likes or dislikes.”

“Did I imply such injustice to you ? And

yet, though theroretically we know of how little importance wealth may be in attaining the great end of life, it is difficult always to regulate our wishes ; wealth gives so much power of doing good, and making others happy."

" But often, too often, takes away the wish to do so," returned Hilary. " But if the power to oblige can be obtained only by wealth, Captain Hepburn must have valuable hoards of available riches ; for I know those who feel themselves unable to repay what they owe him, except by sentiments of gratitude which can never grow cold."

He turned his eyes on her with a look of pleasure which was unseen, for her eyes were bent on the ground ; but he made no answer.

" Mr. Huyton's wealth will oblige the whole neighbourhood to-morrow," continued she ; " but who will remember it as a favour three months hence ? Oh no, the obligations which wealth alone enables one to bestow, can never be

the most highly prized, or gratefully acknowledged."

"I admit it; at least by those whose gratitude is worth having," replied he, giving her one of those looks which she felt all over her, in every nerve; "the gratitude of the pure, unworldly, high-toned, tender heart, is very different in nature and quality from any which could count the cost of a favour by pounds and shillings. Our standard of worth is regulated, I suppose, by our favourite possessions, and the minds which value affection and truth the most, will often esteem services springing from these motives, far beyond their intrinsic merit. They affix an imaginary importance to such acts, from certain properties which they perceive through the magnifying lens of a loving heart; whilst the ignorant and coarse-minded, seeing no token of what may be below the rough surface, naturally prefer a polished brilliant, even though it may be paste."

It was Hilary's turn to be silent now.

“It is La Bruyère, I think, who says that the way in which riches and honours are distributed in this world, shows of how little real value they are in the sight of Heaven,” added Captain Hepburn, when they had walked on in silence a short time.

“That seems to me too much of a discontented sort of submission for poor people to comfort themselves by,” said Hilary ; “we know that riches and honours are great trials and temptations, but they may also be great blessings. Those who have them may view them in the light in which the satirist places them, and so learn to value them less ; but I do not think it does for those who have them not, to comfort themselves with thinking that they are bestowed because people are wicked. May be, it is their possession which has hardened the heart, or blinded the eyes, and so their owners are subjects for our pity, not our censure. Don’t you think it is safer to view them as trials than as judgments ?”

“ You mean that we should be thankful, not self-complacent, for being poor : grateful and also fearful if we are rich,” said he.

“ Yes, and do not fancy from what I said, that riches have spoilt Mr. Huyton. Papa thinks very well of him, and I have no doubt his wealth has hitherto proved a blessing to many.”

The free and disengaged air with which she spoke, would have carried the conviction of her calm feelings regarding the owner of ‘ the Ferns ’ to any one but a lover, who felt his worldly circumstances formed a painful contrast to the individual in question.

After a little pause, Captain Hepburn began again.

“ You have afforded me a striking example of your own theory, Miss Duncan, by showing that it does not require more than a wish to do right, to be able to confer favours. Your reproof for my discontented allusion to my worldly circumstance, is an obligation, the value of which I hope I am not too dull to appreciate.”

“A reproof!” said Hilary, with a look of alarm and crimson cheeks; “indeed I am not so presumptuous; I did not mean it.”

“Then was the presumption mine, in supposing myself a sufficient object of interest to you to incur it,” replied he, smiling. “I would rather be judged worthy of a reproof than of contempt.”

“I see you are laughing at me,” replied Hilary, smiling also; “and it was stupid of me to believe you serious, when you talked in that way; but you looked so grave, I thought you really meant it.”

Whether Captain Hepburn might not have succeeded in convincing her that he did mean a great deal, and that his looks as well as his words could be depended on, cannot be known, as just then Mr. Duncan and Maurice came in sight, and their conversation concluded as the others joined them.

CHAPTER IX.

“ In the hall, with sconces blazing,
Ladies waiting round her seat,
Clothed in smiles beneath the dais,
Sat the Duchess Marguerite.”

THE CHURCH OF BROU.

VICTORIA was fortunate in her arrangements. The weather, that great object of interest, because of uncertainty, in our island, beginning with a little hesitation, settled into brilliancy and warmth; and the sun, after coquetting in the morning with the earth, through the clouds which it had called up round itself, finally dispersed them all, and smiled out graciously on the many anxious eyes turned towards it.

Pretty and elegant as Hilary looked, when dressed for the fête, I do not believe that she gained anything in Captain Hepburn's eyes by her more elaborate toilette ; he would have preferred seeing her in her usual morning gown ; although he blamed himself for selfishness, at the thought which would have deprived her, if possible, of so great a pleasure. However, he had an unexpected consolation, which more than made up for the pain of helping her into Mr. Huyton's carriage, when he perceived that the little bunch of double violets he had taken such pains to gather from under an exceedingly wild and overhanging sweet-briar bush, were now carefully arranged in a knot of white riband, and formed her only ornament as a *bouquet de corsage*. Hilary herself had no very overpowering expectations of pleasure from the party. Her principal emotion was curiosity, to witness a scene from the gay world, such as she little expected to find transported into their forest life. For herself, she was far too insignificant in her

own opinion, to form more than one of the many spectators of the festivity ; she hoped that from behind Mrs. Fielding's chair, she might look on quietly, and see how her friends were admired and courted ; Victoria, of course, would be first, and most prominent ; perhaps the two sisters from the Abbey might come next in importance. She hoped Sybil and Gwyneth would enjoy themselves ; she was sure Mr. Huyton would make it pleasant for them if he could, but he would probably be too busy to attend to them ; but then, Maurice, too, would be there, and would certainly be kind and careful ; and if Nest was happy, and her sisters pleased, and if Captain Hepburn sometimes came and conversed with her, she should be very well off.

Such were her reflections as they drove along to 'the Ferns ;' and so she settled her expectations of amusement for the day.

Whatever other cares might have engrossed the master of the house, there was nothing to prevent his being ready to assist Hilary and

her sisters from the carriage. He shook hands warmly with the young ladies, caught Nest in his arms, and kissed her affectionately, declaring it was an age since he had seen her, and then drawing Miss Duncan's arm under his, walked with her into the house, with an air of satisfaction and appropriation, which, perhaps, it was as well for Captain Hepburn's peace of mind that he did not see.

In the hall were a profusion of bouquets, prepared, as Charles told Hilary, that any lady might take one who liked; he picked out the two prettiest for her sisters himself, and gave them with pleasant speeches and open friendly looks; but in the ante-chamber he stopped again, and taking from a vase standing there, a most exquisitely-arranged bunch of flowers, far more rare and beautiful than any of the others, he gave them to Hilary himself, without a word, but with a look which made her feel as if the flowers had burnt her fingers, and

raised an intense desire to dash them immediately on the ground.

The hot blood mounted to her cheeks, and her eyes were bent on the beautiful blossoms with an intentness which seemed to indicate a serious study of their botanical peculiarities ; but she could not have told of what they consisted, nor have distinguished the moss-roses from the *Peristerium*, or the *Deletria* from the orange blossoms she held in her hand. She was thinking how much she preferred the scent of double violets ; or, perhaps, comparing the glance which had accompanied each gift, and wondering why the one should recal the other, or why, if their expression was so much alike, the impression on her own mind should be so different. He led them on, without speaking, to the saloon, where Mrs. Fielding was seated, and then, as that lady rose to welcome them, he said :

“ I need not beg you to be kind to them, dear

aunt ; you know how much I trust to you, when I place them under your care."

Hilary's cheeks were still glowing, as the elder lady embraced her in foreign fashion, and expressed her extreme pleasure at seeing her there. Her manner to her sisters was hardly less cordial, and Nest received immediately the permission most valued by a child of her age, to run about and look at every thing before the company came.

A minute after, Victoria came in, and attaching Hilary immediately to herself, she said they would go round and take a survey of the decorations. Every thing was equally complete and beautiful ; flowers and evergreens, scattered about in profusion on the lawn, in the house, and in the pavilion in the garden where the feast was to be served. Victoria went about examining every thing, and explaining her plans to Hilary ; how the band was to be stationed on such a terrace, and what music they were to play ; how refreshments in any quantity, and of every

description, would be procurable in the pavilion, between three and six o'clock, so that the most dainty young lady, or most hungry young gentleman, might be perfectly satisfied. She pointed out the boats which had been brought from the boat-houses, and were now floating invitingly by the side of the sheet of water, the boatmen in a picturesque costume, lounging by them ; she showed the glen where she intended to produce a grand effect in the evening by a bugle, for she had discovered there a most enchanting echo ; and with this she hoped to surprise the company, whilst they were looking on at a grand exhibition of fire-works, to be displayed on the edge of the lake ; then they might conclude with a magnificent supper in the banquetting room, to be preceded, if they liked, by dancing, in the house ; and singing from some professional performers, who had come from London for the occasion.

“ In short,” said Victoria, “ I hope to illustrate my name in the country, and be remem-

bered with gratitude for a half year at least.

She seemed in high spirits, and went about singing to herself, as she pointed out one ornament or another to Hilary—

“Voi che sapete
Che cosa è l'amor.”

Hilary did not feel very gay herself; the sight of Victoria had reminded her of Mr. Huyton's supposed engagement, and she was shocked and ashamed of herself, to think that she had even for a moment imagined he had implied any degree of devotion to herself by his manner. She was angry at what she believed her own unpardonable vanity, and wondered what could make her so absurd. Then she began to meditate how it happened that she could have imagined any resemblance between the look of Charles and that of Captain Hepburn; could they really think alike? were they actuated by the same feelings, and if so, was the latter also

engaged to another woman? why did such an idea give her pain? what right had she to turn so sick at heart as she contemplated it? what was it to her? Oh, shame, shame on herself, that she could have allowed such fancies to take possession of her heart; that she should be actually unhappy at the notion of his loving another; she, who had home duties which ought to exclude such feelings; she, who had so firmly resolved to devote herself to her father and sisters; she, who had never heard from him a word which could imply a similar preference for herself; could she have been indulging in such a weak and foolish partiality?

She could hardly attend to what her friend was saying; she was incapable of giving a rational answer, and her only wish was to be allowed to sit down in some remote corner, and hide her blushes and her emotion. Charles Huyton joined them as they stood on the lawn, to tell Victoria that some carriages were approaching down the avenue, and ask whether she would not return to the house.

Hilary was most thankful for this relief; they went back to the saloon together, and she gladly retreated into a nook behind Mrs. Fielding's chair, where she hoped to be quiet and unobserved amidst the expected crowds. The room soon began to fill with company, and after a while, Victoria, finding that although inconveniently crowded, nobody seemed to like to go out first, led the way herself to the lawn, and the band commencing at the same time to perform their part, everybody was ready enough to follow her example; Hilary, who was still standing with her sisters in a recess of one of the windows, was, however, roused from her engrossing thoughts by the rapturous greeting of Dora Barham, whose party coming rather late, did not arrive until the first crowd had greatly dispersed.

Isabel, after speaking to the Duncans, and other of her acquaintance, wanted to draw Dora away, as their chaperon, Lady Mar-

garet, had proposed going out on the terrace. But Dora would not leave Hilary, whom she had not seen for more than a week ; so Isabel and her party passed on, only calling her a wilful child as they went.

They had not been gone many minutes, when the one arrived for whom Dora's eyes had been anxiously searching, and whose appearance brought hot, quick, pretty blushes to her cheeks. It was impossible not to perceive her emotion, although the reason and object of it, amidst such a varying assembly, might have been doubtful to those who had no clue to guide them. Maurice and Captain Hepburn entered together, and advancing at once towards Mrs. Fielding, to whom the latter had to be introduced, of course, came immediately afterwards to join the little group in the window behind her.

Perhaps it would not have been easy to have found a more complete contrast than those young friends exhibited at that moment.

Dora glowing, smiling, dimpling, with pleasure, and displaying, with a sincerity which her education had been intended to repress and contradict, the emotions which the sight of Maurice called out; and Hilary, pale and cold, struggling to conceal a degree of most unusual excitement, under a calmness which gave her an air almost approaching to haughtiness.

Captain Hepburn came up with an eagerness not often shown by him, although not to be compared with the glow of satisfaction which Maurice exhibited when he saw who was his sister's companion; and at the first tones of his voice, the first glance of his eye, Hilary's coldness vanished, her fears were removed, and all her happiness restored to her; for she felt that his look and tone alike said openly that she was *first* with him, and that each look and tone was truth.

His conversation, after he had smilingly

satisfied her anxiety as to her father's being comfortably settled with Mrs. Paine by his side, turned on the house and scenery. It was grand and beautiful; he had not been prepared for a mansion so fine, or a park so picturesque; she had never described it as so very charming; did she not think it so?

"Had she not? she thought she had mentioned how much she admired it; perhaps he had forgotten; descriptions of unknown places seldom made much impression."

That depended, he affirmed, on who gave the description; he did not think he had forgotten any thing she had ever said, any conversation they had ever held.

Hilary looked down at the bunch of exotics she held in her hand. They caught his eye also, and he remarked on their beauty, taking them from her hand to examine them.

"They are all foreigners," said he, "or raised in a hot-house!"

“Yes, I believe they came from Mr. Huyton’s hot-houses, which are always beautiful.”

“And what is that, and that, and that?” questioned he, still holding the flowers. He made her tell him the names of each blossom, and commented on them and their peculiarities.

He seemed very happy, and perhaps was rendered still more so, by an observation of Hilary’s in reply to his remarks. As he returned her flowers, he said, with a sort of subdued smile,

“You should give me my violets back again, for they are quite put to shame by these grand specimens of floriculture. They did very well at the Vicarage, but here they seem out of place, and it would be a charity to hide them in their native obscurity again.”

“Then they are exactly like their wearer,” replied she, blushing a little, and smiling at

the same time, "and sympathy forbids my throwing them away."

"I had no intention of doing that," was his answer; "the modest beauty and fragrance which may be eclipsed amidst a crowd of gayer forms and brighter colours, are too dear to me, to be in danger of neglect. Should you consider it throwing them away then, to return them to me?"

Hilary hesitated.

"I do not wish to part with them," said she; and then afraid lest he should consider her refusal to do so, as the result of a regard for the donor, she added, "I love real English-grown violets better than the rarest exotics."

"At least, do not throw them away yourself," said he, earnestly; "give them to me when faded and withered; they will still be sweet."

Hilary was conscious that she had no intention whatever of throwing them away; but

she did not wish to tell him so ; she coloured very much, and did not answer.

“Then you will not bestow on me even a faded bouquet?” said he, looking at her with smiling eyes, and not seeming much distressed at her conscious hesitation.

“If I give you two or three flowers now, will you leave me the rest in peace?” said she, playfully ; “but I must say, I think it ungenerous to wish to take back from me what you bestowed unasked, unless you saw me neglecting or undervaluing the gift.”

“Unsolicited gifts are sometimes not much prized,” replied he, softly ; “might I flatter myself that you fixed any value to *all* I have bestowed on you—”

“Miss Duncan,” said Mr. Huyton, advancing to the corner where the little group stood, forming two distinct pairs, each too much engrossed to be conscious of aught beyond them, “Victoria has sent me to conduct you

to her ; I am not to return without you, on any account."

He offered his arm to Hilary, who started and coloured exceedingly at the sudden interruption to a sentence, which, from its tone and manner, she was particularly anxious to hear completed.

Mr. Huyton looked inquiringly at her companion, and then rousing Maurice from the whispered conversation with Dora, which had quite engrossed him, desired to be presented to his friend.

Hilary's hand was under his arm, as he made polite speeches to Captain Hepburn, and he looked so very much as if he thought she belonged to him, that the other could not forbear noticing it ; and a doubt shot through his mind, whether the conjectures of Maurice relative to his engagement to Miss Fielding, could have the slightest foundation.

It had been this very announcement which had raised his spirits, and made him

bolder in his own advances ; and the contradiction of all his hopes which his fancy drew from Charles Huyton's manner, was such as immediately to depress and silence him.

“ Where are my sisters ? ” enquired Hilary, looking round, now first aware that they had left her.

Charles told her they had gone out on the lawn with Mrs. Fielding some time before—had she not missed them ? he hoped, then, she had been pleasantly engaged. It was said in a simple and friendly tone ; but the thought of betraying such absence of mind, deepened the colour in her cheeks, and she glanced apprehensively at Captain Hepburn, to see if he had noticed it.

Perhaps he had, for his eyes met hers, and she hastily looked away.

“ Are you going, Hilary ? ” said Dora, now perceiving the movement around her ; “ oh !

don't leave me ! I have not the least notion where my sister and Lady Margaret are."

"You must come with us then, Miss Barham," replied their host ; "for Miss Duncan must go—Victoria wants her."

"*Must* is for the king, Mr. Huyton," said Dora, in pretended indignation. "Please, Hilary, do not let him dictate to you ! I would not submit to such assumption of authority."

Maurice offered to conduct her to her party, wherever they might be ; and Dora, caring more for present pleasure than prudence, took his arm, and walked happily after her friend.

Hilary did not mind the interruption so much, when she found Captain Hepburn still accompanied them ; she hoped for other opportunities of conversing with him.

Victoria was standing amidst the grandest and most important of the guests, receiving and returning courteous speeches, taking admi-

ration as her due, and flattery as the air she breathed ; but she welcomed her friend with a smile, shook hands cordially with Maurice, and advanced with alacrity to greet Captain Hepburn. Her attention to a party almost unknown to the whole of the surrounding circle, and the position Hilary occupied on Mr. Huyton's arm, roused a good deal of observation, and many eyes and eye-glasses were turned on them, and not a few whispered commentaries and enquiries passed round, as to who they were.

Criticism and satire were, however, unable to find anything for observation in the quiet grace and refined simplicity of Miss Duncan, who was much too unconscious of the observation drawn on her, and too little engrossed by thoughts of herself, to be shy, although she was too humble not to be retiring in such a group. If she noticed that people looked towards her, she naturally concluded that they were attracted by the appearance of their host ;

and if she had been observing enough to discover traces of admiration, she would still have attributed it to his claims, or those of Dora, who was close to her.

“You belong to us, Hilary,” said Victoria, quite loud enough to be heard by those near, although in a sort of stage-aside; “you are part of our *home* circle, and must not get away. I cannot do without you.”

She then turned and drew Captain Hepburn into conversation; Maurice and Dora joined his sisters who were a little behind, and although Hilary would gladly have disengaged herself from Charles, she could not do so immediately, without an appearance of awkwardness, which she wished to avoid.

The grand luncheon, or breakfast, or whatever name the meal deserved, obliged him to quit her, for there were Countesses’ and Earls’ daughters present, whose claims could not be disregarded; and when they were all seated at table, Hilary found herself, much to her relief,

with her own family, and Captain Hepburn beside her. They were, however, close to Victoria, and, in spite of all the Lord Williams and Honourable Johns who courted her notice, when they rose, she still seemed inclined to pay more attention to the naval captain than to any of the other gentlemen.

He had been admiring her in a low tone to Hilary, during the repast, and she, with a sort of satisfaction for which she was afterwards ashamed of herself, informed him she was going to be married and settled in England, in the autumn, but without adding her own idea as to who her future husband was. Although, therefore, Hilary would rather he should have stayed near her, she was not much disturbed at Victoria's preference for his society; and when she saw them slowly walking together, gradually disengaging themselves from the company, and finally disappearing behind a thicket of evergreens, she felt no jealousy, although she did wish to join them. The company then

gradually scattered themselves about ; some went to the lake, and entered the boats ; some strolled through the conservatories and forcing houses ; some visited the stables ; some wandered amidst the wild scenery of the park ; there was a game of bowls going on between some lively parties, whilst others were content to remain still, and listen to the music. An air of general content and satisfaction appeared ; everybody was determined to be pleased, and a great many actually were so. The party of a wealthy and single man, would naturally be popular ; and as he took great pains to go about and diffuse his civilities amongst all the young ladies, introduce those who wished it to each other, recommend amusements, suggest variety to the dull, and encourage every kind of hilarity, there was no outward symptom of discontent or ennui ; all was as lively and harmonious as the music on the lawn.

• Victoria had carried off Captain Hepburn, to

show him what she considered the most curious part of the park. Such was her excuse.

This was an avenue of very ancient yews, whose large stems and branches intertwined overhead, formed a gloomy aisle, which reminded one of a cathedral crypt. It led to a circle of still older trees of the same species, surrounding a mound of earth; the trunks were hollowed by time, the over-hanging boughs were, many of them, blanched and bare, and sprung out like huge skeleton arms, which produced a ghastly spectral effect; beyond, and enclosing them, was a double row of gigantic oaks, just now in all the glory of young spring foliage; but even their bright green was unable to give a liveliness to a scene in which such heavy and dark hues predominated. The ground beneath their feet was dry and brown, a thick carpet of the needle-shaped leaves of the yews making it soft and slippery; no green plant could spring under their poisonous shade; there was neither leaf nor flower to be seen;

all was gloomy and sombre as a neglected churchyard.

“Now, is not this wild and strange, Captain Hepburn?” said the young lady. “I brought you here alone, that you might enjoy the full effect of contrast; we left light and music, company and mirth—here we have gloom and silence, solitude and sombre thoughts. Tell me, do you think this is the work of those ancient Druids, who ruled your country before history begins, or do you suppose the Saxons, my countrymen, worshipped here their Thor and Friga?”

“It is very strange and wild, truly, Miss Fielding; do you delight in such violent contrasts? Old as they are, however, I think these trees are hardly old enough to be planted by Druid hands: remember the lengthened period—nineteen hundred years at least.”

“Horrid, to destroy my pleasant illusions; I had hoped to awe you into immediate acquiescence with my fancies.”

“And pass for Friga with the golden hair, yourself, for you are more like a Saxon than a British divinity of old?” said he, with smiling gallantry.

“I am Saxon on my mother’s side,” replied she, “as you doubtless know; so is my cousin Charles; but I believe we both intend to turn English in our habits and homes for the future.”

She coloured a little as she said this, and, after a moment’s pause, she added,—

“Do you know the county of Cheshire, Captain Hepburn?”

“Not at all—do you?”

“Not yet, but I expect hereafter to get pretty well acquainted with it. It is there my future home is situated, and, of course, the place excites some curiosity in my mind.”

“Your future home!” repeated he, a little surprised.

“Yes, did you not know? I thought Hilary might have told you,” replied she.

“I had heard that Miss Fielding had done one of my countrymen the honour of promising to take his name, and adopt his nation!” he answered, in a sort of tone which, however, implied a dissatisfied or uncertain mind.

“Then why are you surprised at my mentioning it? perhaps that shocks British prejudices; but with us a betrothal is not a secret! Was that what astonished you?”

“No, to say the truth, it was at discovering a mistake of mine. I had fancied ‘the Ferns’ had been the future home which you had selected,” was his reply.

“Oh!” said Victoria, colouring and laughing, “that was your guess, was it? I wonder at your want of penetration. If this had been my future home, I should not have been visiting here now, and you must have seen—oh, by the way, Charles was not here before, so you have *not* seen anything. But Hilary did not tell you that, did she?”

“Miss Duncan mentioned no name to me,” said he; “she only informed me to-day, that you were to be united to a countryman of ours.”

“Oh, Hilary, of all people, has reason to know better; for though I never mentioned Mr. Legh by name to her, she knew Charles was not my *futur*. Perhaps if you had seen them together, you would have known it too.”

“Seen who together?” asked Captain Hepburn, with a countenance of extreme self-command, which baffled, by its quietness, the scrutiny of Victoria’s bright eyes.

“My cousin and Miss Duncan! She will not engage herself at present, because of her father and sisters; she devotes herself to them; but that kind of thing will not last for ever; and though one has no right to speculate on a young lady’s feelings, in spite of her saying *no*, I suspect Charles’s constancy is making way with her, and will meet with its reward in

time. Meantime, I say nothing to her on the topic."

Captain Hepburn was a brave man, one who had met peril unflinchingly, and dared death in a good cause. His nerves were under perfect control, and one reason, probably, of the influence he exercised over those about him, was that he had learnt, before commanding others, to command himself. Whatever his feelings were, on hearing this declaration from his companion, he betrayed none of them ; and after a little pause, he asked, in a quiet tone, devoid of all trace of emotion,

"Do you mean that Miss Duncan refused your cousin, when he offered his hand?"

"Yes ; but that was nearly a year ago, and there has been, I suspect and hope, a gradual change working since that. She was very young then, and had never thought of marrying, and her father's blindness was just ascertained, and was a great shock to her, so she thought she should never leave him, and would

not listen to Charles ; but he is very persevering and patient, quite a model of a lover ; and as her sisters get old enough to take her place, and other feelings for other people arise, she will retract. As to my cousin, he, I am sure, will never change."

Victoria did not intend to do any harm by what she had said : she really believed, that in promoting a union between her cousin and Hilary, she was acting as kindly by one as the other, and her assertions were strictly true. She thought he was gaining ground, and fancied that if she could only keep away rivals, his interests would be safe ; time and constancy, a better knowledge of his value, and a more thorough appreciation of the honour his love did its object, would alter her opinions, and change her tone.

His value she hoped to assist in demonstrating, by showing him to Hilary as the centre of attraction, the admired, courted, popular, master of ' the Ferns ;' and the distinction which his

notice conferred on her in that party, would perhaps induce her to consider that it would be worth while to become his wife. It was very natural that she should imagine this ; she judged, as all must do, by her own feelings, and set before her friend the temptations which would have had most influence with herself.

She had, on first arriving at 'the Ferns,' been a little vexed that she could not awaken any visible partiality in her cousin's mind ; for though betrothed, she had a strong taste for admiration and flattery ; but she had soon penetrated his secret, then gained his confidence, and warmly taken up his cause. The appearance of Captain Hepburn, his manner to Hilary, and her glances at him, had alarmed her ; and desirous to prevent her young friend from throwing away what she conceived to be the substance, in grasping at a shadow, she determined to give him such information on the subject, as would probably occasion him to draw back, and leave the ground open.

She did not know her companion's character, and was quite mistaken in Hilary's also ; she was, moreover, too late in her interference to do any good. Captain Hepburn felt, as he heard Victoria's suggestions, that he loved Hilary, and he believed that he had made his partiality evident to her and others. To draw back, therefore, because he had a rival, was not to be thought of ; it would compromise his own character for truth and honour. She might refuse him ; of course, if she preferred Charles Huyton, she would ; and he had as little taste for a refusal as any other man in England ; but his character required that he should take his chance ; and his feelings of honour, nay, his principles of integrity, were stronger than his vanity and self-love. He had given her reason to believe in his preference, he must give her the opportunity of answering it, not so much for her own sake, for she might not care, but for his ! Then came fancy, whispering, would she not care ? was there no soft glance in her

ingenuous eyes, no thrilling tone in her voice, which might give him grounds of hope ? He was poor, compared to his rival ; but she did not value riches ; he thought, if she would not accept a man because he had them, neither would she refuse another because he had them not. His profession would probably soon call him away, and perhaps he could not offer her immediate marriage ; but then she, herself, considered that incompatible with her family bonds ; when these were lighter, would she not consent to become his ? It seemed as if the very circumstances which, in most cases, would have been evils and draw-backs, were now advantages to support his claim. His own freedom from family ties, his having no settled home, no landed property which bound him to one spot ; all these would be no objection in her case, whereas the reverse might have formed impediments to his wishes.

It did not take very long to think all these thoughts ; and the consequence of these ideas,

was, that instead of exhibiting depression and uneasiness at Victoria's observations, he showed a calm face and a self-possessed manner, which induced her to believe he, at least, was indifferent on the subject.

"Where does this path lead?" enquired he, ascending a slope on one side of the circle of yews, and looking round him.

"We are just above the lake, and I thought of going down that way," replied Victoria. "Come along this winding path, and we shall reach some of the company. I hear voices down below. You are a sailor, will you not take me out in a boat for a sail? we will ask Hilary, or one or two other ladies, to go with us."

"I am afraid you will think me a very ungallant and disobliging sailor, Miss Fielding; but I must say, of all things in the world, I dread a water-party of ladies, and never, if I can help it, embark in one."

"Ah! it has no charms for you, no novelty.

‘Too much water hast thou,’ as the Queen says to Ophelia. I daresay it is stupid.”

“I may be stupid, perhaps, but I think it dangerous, and willingly avoid the responsibility. So few men understand how to sail a boat. Unless you had heard as much as I have, you could not imagine how often they upset; and when women are on board, what can be the consequence but mischief?”

“Some people are not so cautious, for I see a boat on the lake; and, if I do not mistake, Maurice Duncan and the two Barhams are in it.”

“Yes; but they are only sculling along, and a girl might do that. I really do not suppose we could sail if we tried; there is scarcely a breath of wind, or only a puff at intervals.”

The path down which they were descending was so screened by shrubs, that although they could catch a glimpse of the lake and its borders here and there, they were unseen themselves by those below.

There were a good many people on the bank ; at a little distance, a group of children were merrily dancing to a violin, which one of the woodmen had produced ; near them were some mammas and elder sisters, looking on, and admiring. Victoria was close enough to recognise some individuals ; they saw Charles Huyton, encouraging the frolics of the children ; Mrs. Fielding and Hilary were standing under a tree at the edge of the lake, where a steep bank formed a promontory above the water, apparently watching Maurice's boat, which was slowly approaching them.

When they had descended a few yards farther, they entirely lost sight of the loiterers by the lake, and, although so near as to catch voices and laughter, were unable to discover what was passing. They heard a child's voice cry, " Hilary ! Hilary !" and recognised the merry tones of little Nest ; then some one, in an accent of alarm, cried, " Take care !" and then there was a shriek, an exclamation of

terror from many voices, a plunge in the water, and a silence.

Captain Hepburn sprang forwards, and in a moment had cleared the underwood, and obtained sight of the bank and the water. Mrs. Fielding stood where she had been, and many had rushed to the water's edge, and were gazing in. Hilary and Nest were both out of sight.

END OF VOL. I.



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